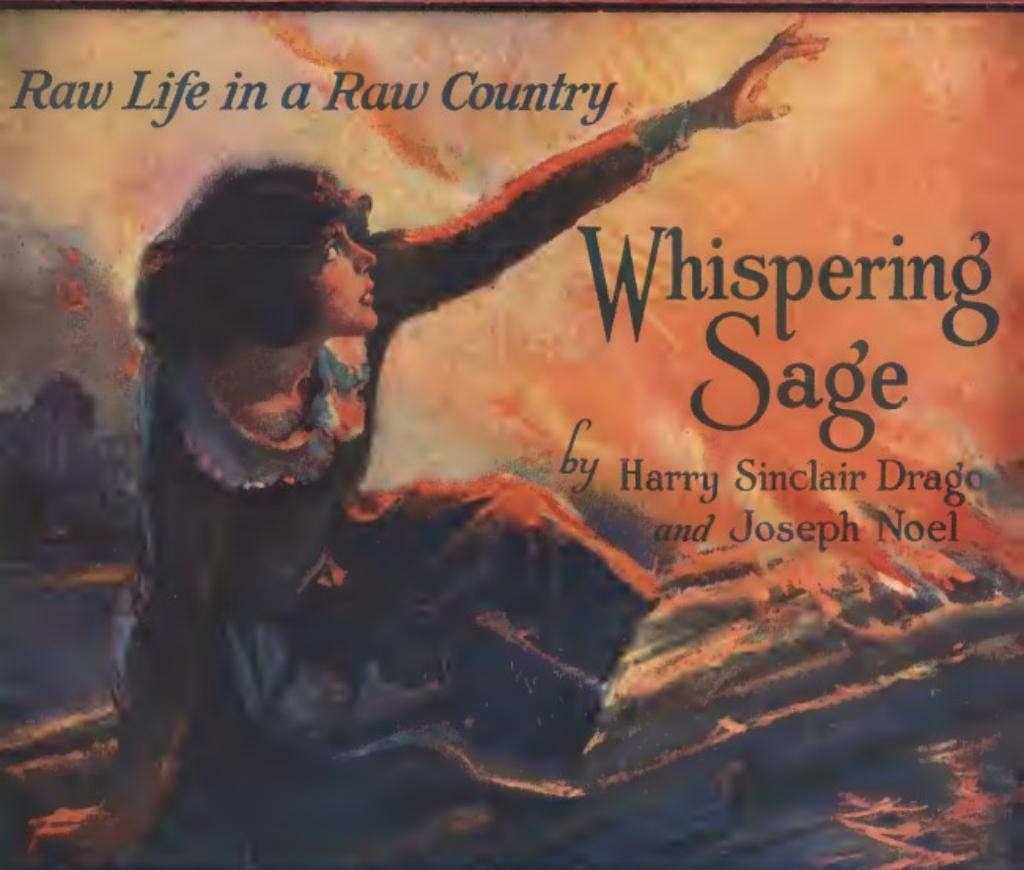


ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Raw Life in a Raw Country

Whispering Sage

by Harry Sinclair Drago
and Joseph Noel



10¢ PER COPY

JULY 1

BY THE YEAR \$4.00

Would You Like to Be a Borrowed Bride?

LEIGH GORDON GILTNER, in "*The Shock Absorber*," has written a story of a young husband who needed a wife to convince his mother and father that he was a dignified married man. His real bride was elsewhere, getting a divorce. Complicated situation, is it not?

Much Funnier than "Pigs Is Pigs"

ELLIS PARKER BUTLER has written a story entitled "*Use Common Sense*," which is more laughable than the guinea pig story upon which Mr. Butler's reputation as a humorist rests. That his latest is his best is hard to believe, is it not?

Do You Want Rough Stuff? Here It Is!

WILLIAM SLAVENS McNUTT has done his best novel in "*The Land of Turmoil*." It combines humor, conflict, and dramatic love from start to finish. Good? Oh, very good! And what is more, most of the real action takes place right in New York among the underworld denizens.

Also Eleven Short Stories by

Elisabeth Sanxay Holding	John D. Swain
George Allan England	Robert T. Shannon
Mella Russell McCallum	H. Bedford-Jones
Elmer Brown Mason	William Merriam Rouse
Louise Kennedy Mabie	Leslie Burton Blades
James W. Egan	

SECOND installment of EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS "*The Girl from Hollywood*," far and away the most interesting inside film story written, and about which the whole country is talking, will be found in this issue, prefaced by a synopsis of the first installment.

MUNSEY'S for July

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Address.....

City..... State.....

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOL. CXLIII

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NUMBER 6

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Next Week will start the first installment of

"THE MAD VERDICT"

the story of a great love that lives untarnished through a gripping drama of mystery, sacrifice, and intrigue—by

ELIZABETH YORK MILLER

whom you already know as the author of "Doubles or Quits," "Her Phantom Lover," "The Greatest Gamble," etc.

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, and TEMPLE HOUSE, TEMPLE AVENUE, E. C., LONDON

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PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY. COPYRIGHT, 1922

Entered as second class matter July 15, 1920, at the Post-Office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879

How "Modest Jim" Won the \$50 Prize

By WILLIAM LAWRENCE

Author of "The Awakening"

"YES—I remember why they call the Big Boss 'Modest Jim,'" said the Old Timer. "It started way back twenty years ago."

"I was in my third apprentice year when Jim Hadley came to work here—a quiet, bashful boy. His father had died and he was forced to leave grammar school and go to work."

"He was never among the groups of boys dodging the boss or watching the clock nor mixed up in anything that wasn't strictly business. And he never fooled away his time with the bunch after hours, so we left him pretty much to himself. We called him 'Modest Jim.'

"One day Old Man Adams, who owned this outfit in those days, came out into the shop and tacked up a sign over the foreman's desk.

"It seemed that the Old Man and his designer had run into a stone wall or what was Greek to most of us kids those days, and was offering a prize of fifty dollars to anyone who solved the problem. He must have been up against it or he never would have asked our bunch for help."

"About two weeks later, after the rest of us had forgotten all about it, the Old Man rushed out to Jim and fairly pushed five crisp ten dollar bills into his hand. He had solved the problem.

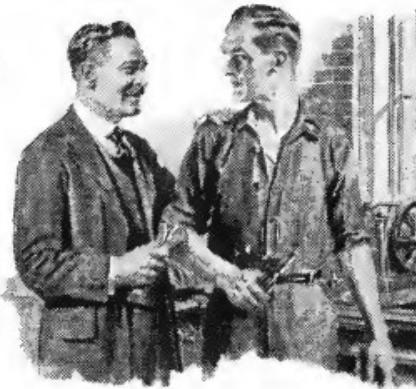
"When the foreman asked him how he did it, he replied, 'Oh, it wasn't anything great. Only a fresh brain on a stale subject.' That's all he ever said about it. But do you know what that boy had been doing? He'd been studying with the International Correspondence Schools in his spare time. No wonder he got ahead!"

"And he went right up, and up and up, until today he is the Big Boss. And the rest of us are just about where we started. He's still 'Modest Jim,' but he's earning five times as much as I am."

"Take my advice, lad, and follow along in Jim's footsteps. Don't wait until it's too late to get the special training that is so essential to success."

Employers everywhere are looking for men like "Modest Jim"—men who want to get ahead—who are willing to devote a part of their spare time to training for advancement.

How much longer are you going to wait before taking the step that is bound to bring you a better job and more money?



Isn't it better to make your start now than to wait a year or five years and then wish you had? It certainly is!

No matter where you live, the I. C. S. will come to you. No matter what your handicaps or how small your means, we have a plan to meet your circumstances. No matter how limited your previous education, the simply-written, wonderfully-illustrated I. C. S. lessons make it easy to learn. No matter what career you may choose, some one of the 300 I. C. S. courses will surely suit your needs.

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AGENTS! 1922's GREATEST SENSATION. 11 piece toilet article set selling like狂 at \$1.75 with \$1.00 dressmaker's shear free to each customer. Line up with Davis for 1922. E. M. Davis Co., Dept. 58, Chicago.

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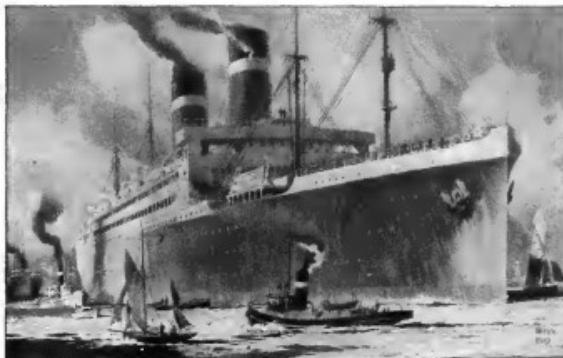
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JULY 8
JULY 15

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ARGOSY ALLSTORY WEEKLY MAGAZINE

160 Pages

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Classified Advertising continued from page 4.

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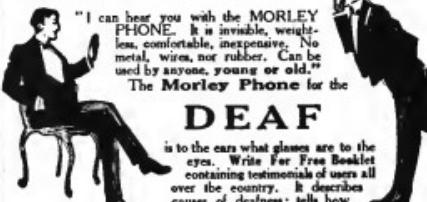
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Whispering Sage

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO and JOSEPH NOEL

Mr. Drago is author of "Desert Law."

CHAPTER I.

"MOVE, YOU GREASER!"

THE scorching rays of the noonday sun beat down the Nevada desert. For mile on mile the alkali flats stretched away until the eye wearied of distance.

Across the waste two tiny specks moved. Save for them all life seemed dead. Long before sunrise they had crossed the mighty range to the north, now dwarfed by distance into little, fantastic hills of purple cotton.

Both horses and men were gray with dust. The horses snorted from time to time, to blow the biting alkali from their nostrils. The men's throats were bricky dry, too; and yet the taller of the two hummed a song. Ahead of them green trees beckoned. It was the fringe of stunted cedars that had been their sign post all morning long. They expected to find water and grass in the Timbered Buttes. Beyond that they had no plans.

Abruptly they began climbing the bench

lands. Their circle of vision widened. They topped the crest, and the country of the Little Washoe burst upon them. Paradise Valley spread out in a gigantic horseshoe. A range, the Santa Rosas, banked three sides of it the never-failing willows marking where Rebel Creek came tumbling out of the hills at the apex of the horseshoe, and being deftly turned, swung off to the right, hugging the base of the hills until it met the river that crossed the valley from one end of the horseshoe to the other.

Tired and thirsty as he was the tall man stopped for a brief second to appraise that wonderful valley.

"Ain't that a sweet country, Shorty?" he murmured to the short, bandy-legged man, hard of face and slow of speech, who rode beside him.

Shorty's answer was a grunt. He glanced with a trace of annoyance at the suave, whimsical Buck; and yet he pulled his horse to a halt. It was significant. In this, as in all things, he followed the other. Bodine had won from him such allegiance as Shorty had little expected to give to any man.

Early yesterday morning, over the Oregon line at Denio, and again last night at the old Ashdown mine they had feasted. Bodine had talked much of Oregon and little of Idaho or Wyoming; but if the truth were told, he had seen almost nothing of Oregon and a great deal of Idaho and Wyoming in the past year. They had been harried sore in their old haunts. They were in a new country. Buck felt that he could afford to smile.

"Yes, sir," he exclaimed. "This country suits me. No railroads, no telegraph, no talk; just a dinky local telephone line. We'll stay here and 'Let the rest of the world go by.'" He hummed the words of that popular song of the day.

The grass was good in the buttes. They camped there. Life grew rosy again. But even such security and ease as was theirs began to pall. For two nights they had watched the twinkling lights which marked the little town of Paradise. The lure was insistent, and on the third evening they rode into the town and to Benavides's bar.

Benavides was a Basque, and most of his customers were of the same blood. Bodine

and Shorty found the place filled; freighters, sheep-men, the Basque *gente*, and a sprinkling of Double A boys comprised the crowd.

Buck and Shorty edged to the bar and waited. In all that room no man knew them! Their pleasure in the evening grew accordingly. But still they waited, and now to their displeasure. One-eyed Manuel, the Mexican bartender, was busy elsewhere. The delay irked Bodine. Catching the butt of his glowing cigarette between thumb and forefinger, he shot it straight as a bullet into Manuel's face. The red-hot coal burned into the poor wretch's cheek with the sting of a knife slash. The Mexican slapped it to the floor. Murder flared in his heart, but something metallic in Buck's eyes made him pause.

"Move, you greaser, or I'll bring you to life in a hurry," Bodine warned.

Manuel's hand trembled as he set out the glasses for the two strangers. He smiled evilly. Things were too even now. Wait; time would bring an opportunity when the odds would be all his way, so caution counseled him.

The incident had passed quite unnoticed by the crowd. Wash Taylor, a ragged old mule-skinner, had been one of the very few to observe it. He laughed immoderately. Wash was an unmoral old person, all life being raw to him. When Buck bade him drink, he acquiesced with alacrity.

Shorty had to grin to himself at the adroitness with which Bodine drew from the old Skinner the complete history of the valley.

"I'm sort of lookin' round for a place," Buck was saying. "If I could find a small ranch hereabouts at the right price I might be interested."

This was news to Shorty. He half suspected that Buck was merely talking, but he spoke with such conviction that the bandy-legged one eyed him curiously.

"You won't find no place for sale round here; that is, with water on it. And water's gold in this country."

"It's gold, and precious stones, and the whole damn works," Buck asserted. "Without it you and your stock have only got a big thirst."

"Fact is, water or no water, the only place for sale in this hull valley is the old Webster ranch. No water there at all now. Used to be plenty in the old days."

Wash drained his glass.

"Used to be some place then. Hank owned due west from where Rebel Creek forked into the Webster. Maybe you've seen those dead willows stringin' across the valley? They follow the dry wash that used to be Webster Creek. Wa'n't another ranch below him clear to the river. He had all the water. A cloudburst changed that in one night. Water came rushin' down carryin' ever'thin' before it. When it was all over, Hank found the mouth of the Webster damned up like a mason had done the job. Rebel Creek has been some stream ever since. That was a long time ago."

Wash paused for a moment to ponder over that miracle.

"Yep," he went on, "there was the hull valley changed overnight. Hank moaned and cursed. Nothin' doin'! The courts couldn't go back on old Mother Nature. Say," he queried, "ain't the lawyers got sumthin' to cover a trick like that? The 'accomplished fact'? Well, it was that, all right. That there 'accomplished fact' made Paradise Valley. Look at those ranches bedded down along the Rebel clear to the Washoe. Pretty near all Basques down there. I ain't so fond of them; but they know how to work. I guess nature knew her business. She most generally does."

"What happened to Hank?" Buck demanded.

"Oh, Hank gave up the ship. He's runnin' a store down in Golconda, accordin' to last reports. He tried to sell his place; but, shucks, you couldn't give that ranch away."

By the time they left the sleek Bodine, with his piercing black eyes and jaunty manner, could have retailed the past history of the valley. Old man Webster's passing particularly interested Buck. For the next twenty-four hours it worried and then obsessed him.

"Why did he let go without a fight?" he repeatedly asked the puzzled Shorty. "It don't sound right to me. Somebody wanted to get him out of the way; some friend!

There ain't no big cattle outfit here except the Double A. Maybe they wanted to grab it; but ten years is a long time to wait. Nobody seems to have made a move in all that time. I tell you this thing just gets my nanny."

"Don't make no difference to us," Shorty grumbled. "We got other things to worry about."

"Don't make no difference!" Buck exclaimed. "Why don't it? I smell easy money here."

Shorty and he came down from the hills and camped at the deserted ranch. The obsession grew on Bodine. Shorty, in his dumb way, tried to follow the workings of Bodine's nimble mind. On the morning of the second day Buck came to a decision. He called Shorty to his side.

"I'm going into Winnemucca and have a look at the county records. If old Webster made a filing on his water rights I'm going to buy him out. You wait here; I may be back to-morrow. If I go to Golconda to see Webster I may be gone a week. You wait a week. If I don't come back by then, you find Gloomy and go over into the Malheur Lake country."

The filing had been made. The State of Nevada guaranteed to Henry Webster the right to use a minimum of fourteen miners' inches of water from Webster Creek.

Bodine's enthusiasm for the deal in hand soared. Even the State was on record that there were water rights along Webster Creek!

Five days later Bodine returned. Behind him lumbered a freighter, bringing the tools and necessities of life. Shorty shook his head. No need to ask; Bodine had done as he had said he would.

Shorty found his tongue then, and what he said was to the point. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"This is the cuckoo," he stated. "You'll be gettin' married next."

"You watch my smoke," Bodine answered knowingly. "I'll grow dollars on this little old ranch; before I'm through you'll see that creek runnin' full of water. We're goin' to be so respectable it'll hurt. But you sit tight and keep still. You're my hired man from now on. Somebody's

goin' to wake up one of these mornin's to find us sittin' right on his tail."

CHAPTER II.

"EAVESDROPPERS HEAR NO GOOD—"

IN a thinly settled country, where every man's movements are marked, news spreads quickly. People talked and wondered about Bodine. Who was he, and what foolish ambition led him to try his luck on such a hopeless place?

Of all those who watched and wondered no one was more interested than Dick Acklin, the Big Boss of the Double A. He had been quite content to see old man Webster go. For ten years the Double A had taken both its own and his share of water from Rebel Creek. Even so, it did not suffice. Acklin's crying need was more water. Many times he had been inclined to buy in the Webster place, but it was so worthless that he had never taken it seriously. Bodine's buying it awakened old misgivings. Acklin knew that the right man could make him a lot of trouble. Webster's water rights might still be made the basis of a long, expensive lawsuit.

He stood it as long as he could; and then, instead of bearding Bodine, he rode to the Rancho Buena Vista to see the Señor Arrascada. The old Basque met him as a friend. José was the most powerful of the Basque *gente*. The patriarchal old man abated not one whit of his dignity in the presence of his powerful neighbor. Acklin, indeed, was a frequent visitor. The Rancho Buena Vista did honor in his behalf. And, yet, more often, the feudal lord came to do honor to the Señorita Mercedes, its beautiful mistress.

The hacienda was a low, rambling structure, its wings inclosing a patio which, to all practical purposes, made the rear of the house the front.

Acklin surveyed it with a trace of envy. The cool, quiet, half-darkened house was a relief after the noise and glare of the Bull's Head. José led him to the patio, where cool zephyrs seemed eternally playing. With a sigh of relief Acklin sank into the big, comfortable chair his host offered. The

old man clapped his hands, and the wrinkled, leathery Mariano, his *mozo*, or house boy, came on the run. José sent him for refreshments. Almost instantly he was back, bearing tall, tinkling glasses of cool delight.

They sipped their drinks in silence. From where they sat they could hear the crooning waters of Rebel Creek, seventy-five yards away. Acklin's eyes roamed the patio, with its beds of Indian pinks and lupines. A cleverly contrived ditch brought its life-giving waters to the flowers. From the shelter of its grassy banks a frog croaked querulously.

José offered him one of his choice cigars.

"My friend," he asked, "what brings you to the Rancho Buena Vista this time—business or pleasure?"

"It's always a pleasure to come here, señor. But business; that's something else. By the way"—and Acklin's big, blue eyes contracted until they seemed to shade to gray—"have you seen the fellow who bought the old Webster place?"

"Several times. He's here to-day, down at the corral. Esteban and the vaqueros are breaking horses."

"What's his game?" Acklin snapped.

"Señor, the man is no fool! I sold him a bull two days ago. He haggled over the price to the last penny. I think he will do what he says he will do."

"Humph! He's a fool! Where is he going to get his water? A well? That makes me laugh. I wouldn't take that ranch as a gift. As a matter of fact, haven't you warned half a dozen of your people against taking it?"

"That is true, my friend," José asserted. "You remember how the creek used to lose itself in the quicksands below the house? Webster tried to save that water many times; but everywhere he turned he found quicksand. I am afraid a well there would fill up as soon as it was dug."

"There you are!" Acklin got to his feet. He was a big man, good to look at and younger than his appearance implied. "Did you tell him about the quicksand?"

"Si! He said it didn't worry him—none,' I think he said."

"Of course not; it's a game. You mark

my words. What's he going after; sheep or cattle?"

Old Ironsides smiled.

"No more sheep, my friend. Don't let that worry you. But enough of this man Bodine. How is everything at the Bull's Head?"

"Oh, so-so. Still losing a lot of calves."

"My people, I hope, are not suspected?"

"No. We are losing them in the other direction, toward the Owyhee."

The talk drifted to cattle and the crops. The old Basque had a sense of poise and a choice of words that enabled him to hold his own with the college-bred Acklin.

A little tot of six, unnoticed by them as they talked, had felt his way upon the veranda. His sensitive fingers touched each familiar table and chair as if they were signposts to his unseeing eyes. The murmur of his father's voice told his keen ears where the gray-haired José sat. With uncanny swiftness the boy made his way toward him. Once he almost stumbled, and the sound of his scuffling feet caught the old man's ears. Instantly the father arose, and lifted the little fellow up to him.

"*El hijo mío*," he said tenderly. "Those bad chairs are always in the way, eh?"

The boy rubbed his bruised leg and laughed as his father petted him. He was a beautiful child. His brown, staring eyes made a mute appeal to friend and foe.

For close to five years José had been both father and mother to the little blind Basilio. In spite of all his size and strength it was with the delicate touch of a woman that the old Basque caressed the child.

Acklin stretched out his hands to the boy.

"How is my little buckaroo to-day?" he asked playfully.

"Fine," the child answered timidly, but he made no attempt to go to him.

"It is Señor Acklin, *niño mío*," the old man prompted. "Can't you shake hands with the señor?"

Basilio did as he was bid. Acklin had often tried to make friends with him; but the boy held aloof as if he sensed—with that faculty the blind possess—an enemy, rather than a friend, in the big cowman.

His father set the boy down at his feet. From the fence at the end of the patio, a

magpie scolded in raucous tones. Basilio knew that particular magpie. In a flash he slid off the steps and ran down the graveled walk of the patio. There were no chairs or tables to trip him there. As he ran he cawed and shrieked, until the patio seemed alive with magpies.

When he had almost reached the fastness of the vine-covered fence a black head bobbed up beyond it, and calling again, dashed up a side path of the garden, with the boy in keen pursuit. It was the Señorita Mercedes. Hair flying, her skirts tucked up about her, she fled helter-skelter around the patio until she dropped in a heap. A second later and Basilio was upon her, pulling her hair and showering her with fine spray from the tiny ditch.

This romp was a daily pastime. From the veranda José and Acklin watched. Old Ironsides pretended to be shocked with such conduct in the presence of his distinguished visitor; at the same time he gloried in their fun. Acklin laughed. He had had evidence enough of the tomboy spirit of the beautiful girl. José would have been surprised if he had known that the mighty Acklin had felt the sharpness of her tongue more than once.

In answer to her father's call she came up the steps truculently, the boy hanging on to the ribbons of her dress.

"*Querida*, you are worse than a boy," the old man scolded. "What kind of play is this before our guest?"

She laughed mischievously, her black eyes snapping. She flashed them belligerently at Acklin. He had never seen her more beautiful; her gleaming teeth, well-rounded shoulders and bust, and warm lips all made her adorable.

"You come to see me, huh?" she asked.

Acklin blushed. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

The fact that he might be coming so regularly to the Rancho Buena Vista to see its mistress had begun to dawn on old José some time back. He had proved how astute he was by not saying a word. What an alliance that would be! Mercedes would in reality be the queen of the land then. But now that his daughter had blurted out her tomboy question he blushed as furiously as Acklin.

The uncomfortable visitor tried to turn her blunt question at her expense.

"Now what else could bring me all the way from the Bull's Head? Why, Miss Mercedes, without you the Rancho Buena Vista would be deserted. You lure all of us here."

"The Señor Bodine, he say that, too. *Sí, señorita!*" he say, "you are a little desert rose." "The love of Mike," I say. "You try to squeeze my hand again, this desert rose stick her thorns in you."

"The rogue!" José scolded.

"What hurt that make?" she demanded. "I like very much to have man squeeze my hand—if he is nice man."

José shook his finger at her. Mercedes was thoroughly enjoying herself. Acklin got to his feet. He knew she was watching him.

"When you try that, eh?" she asked saucily.

"Stop *inmediatamente!* Enough!" her father cried. "You are a hopeless minx. You'll not stay for supper, señor?"

"No, I'll be getting back, I guess."

The old Basque caught up Basilio and said good-by to his guest, pleading the need of his presence elsewhere. José knew that extreme youth and old age are not handmaidens to love. Acklin watched the stately old man out of sight. Mercedes had caught up a guitar and was strumming it idly.

The shadows began to creep along the veranda, but both she and the tall man leaning against the stone pillar seemed unmindful of them. The hour and the stillness had taken Mercedes to the knee of the beautiful mother who had sat here years ago and sung these same tunes to her.

All of the wild, tomboy side of her dropped away, leaving her the sweet, emotional little chatelaine her mother had prayed she might be. The lightly held guitar fell to her lap.

Acklin sat down beside her. "Sing some more," he pleaded.

Mercedes shook her head.

"Why you always come see me?" she demanded.

"I've got something for you," Acklin smiled.

"A present?"

Acklin held up a small package. He waved it in front of her eyes as one does with a top for a child. Mercedes clapped her hands joyfully. She started to unwrap it when she stopped short.

"Why you bring me presents, huh?" she demanded.

"I—er—why—" Acklin was flustered. He had foreseen this moment, but his rehearsed speech failed him. Her eyes dared him to go on with it.

"You'll let me bring you a little present now and then, won't you, *nina?*"

It was a lame effort to turn her question, and she laughed in glee.

"You like me so much, mister?" she pursued.

"You know I do. This little present came all the way from the city."

"City" in that country meant San Francisco.

From the tissue paper Mercedes drew forth a tiny vanity case. Her nimble fingers found the spring that unlocked it. With delight she glimpsed the dainty articles the case contained.

Acklin knew Mercedes was pleased.

"What you call that?" she said in a low voice.

"A vanity case. Quite the thing in the city."

"Those things to make your lips and cheeks red—that's vanity, huh?"

She laughed heartily. Acklin was forced to smile at her naïveté. Mercedes tried to release the small compartment that held the powder puff. Acklin reached out his hand to help her. She felt his fingers pressing her own. In a flash she jerked her hand away.

"You're foxy, huh, like the Señor Bodine?" she cried.

"Oh, damn Bodine!" Acklin rasped out.

"Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves," a voice answered in unctuous sweetness.

Mercedes and Acklin turned. Bodine lounged against a pillar at the end of the veranda. He had been an interested witness of the present-making. Acklin acknowledged the introduction with a curt nod of his head. Buck grinned. A less hardy man than Bodine would have wilted

under the look of contempt with which she swept him from head to foot.

"So, Mr. Fresh! For once you tell the truth, huh?"

"I sure didn't know I was intruding on any party, señorita. I just came up to say good-by. I broke that bad gray for Esteban. That *caballo* 'll be gentle enough for you to ride now."

Acklin got to his feet.

"Well, I guess I'll get my hat and run along," he said in that tired way which was common with him.

Bodine waited until the big cowman was out of earshot.

In a voice that held all the intimacy he could put into it he whispered: "He'd be a great catch for you, little girl."

His sedulous eyes appraised her as they had at their first meeting. All women interested Bodine, but not in quite the particular way that she did. It was because of Mercedes that he cultivated her brother, Esteban.

"You think so, eh?" she asked tauntingly. "For why I want to catch him?" She stamped her foot angrily.

Bodine bent over her. "You can trust me, *querida*; I won't tell."

"*Trust* you," she mimicked. "I wouldn't trust you that far." She snapped her fingers to show him.

Buck grinned. There was a charm, a certain air of ease, here at the Rancho Buena Vista that had eluded Bodine all his life; something from which it seemed he had been excluded. It nettled him.

Mercedes caught the thought in his eyes.

"You're plumb beautiful when you get het up, Miss Mercedes," he said insidiously. "I hope to admire you are. I like spirit in a woman, same as I do in a horse."

"You like to break that spirit, too, huh? You best not try those tricks on me. You make me what you call tired."

Like an angry terrier she flounced out of her chair and left Bodine to himself. She slammed the screen door behind her.

"Burn up, you little she-devil!" he muttered under his breath. "I bet I'll break you of that before I'm through."

Acklin came along then, and they walked to their horses together.

"Which way you going?" Bodine asked.

"Back to the Bull's Head."

"I'll side you as far as the Webster, if you have no objection."

"No harm in that," Acklin answered. "Come along."

CHAPTER III.

"BUT WHY TALK OF LAW?"

ACKLIN was anxious to talk to Bodine. Esteban waved them good-by as they cantered away.

Buck was the first to break the silence.

"Nice little bag of tricks back there."

He laughed. Acklin looked at him, but did not answer.

"Her bosco dad might hold her down to convention," the other went on. "But her mother's white blood might make her listen to reason." He paused until he was sure Acklin followed him. "That is, if the big boss used a little reason."

"What are you hinting at?" Acklin demanded peremptorily.

"You don't mean to tell me you are serious with that kid, do you?"

They were walking their horses. Acklin pulled up. He held Bodine's eye.

"Suppose we leave *her* out of this?" he said icily.

"It's none of my business, Acklin. I just wondered what your game was."

"What's yours?"

Acklin drove his question home so suddenly that Bodine was stumped for an answer.

"Well," he said at last, "now we are getting somewhere."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing; only these foreigners seem to be damned prosperous around here, don't they? From your nest at the Bull's Head these ranches down here must look pretty sweet. What a place this valley would be to fatten cattle in. And to think that you could have had it for a song."

Bodine clucked his tongue at the pity of it.

"Well?"

Acklin's patience was running out.

"Those Basques have got the water that

belongs to me by rights. You know that, Acklin."

"Why don't you go after it, then?"

"I'm going after it. Don't let that worry you. And if you are half as wise as I think you are, Acklin, I'll get it. All I want is a little Double A backing to put this deal through."

Acklin's eyes contracted. His surmise had been correct.

"You make me smile, Bodine," he said. "The Double A isn't pulling coals out of the fire for others. You'll run bang into the law if you touch that water."

"Law! Say, I've got all the law I need. The county records say I am entitled to fourteen inches. But why talk of law? If you'll back me up the law will be the last thing to worry about."

"I don't know how you figure to cut me in, Bodine; but you don't think I'd be a party to a deal to do these people out of their water, do you?"

Bodine almost fell off his horse as Acklin uttered his sanctimonious words.

"Oh, hell!" he cried impatiently. "Say, Acklin, do you think I am a fool? Listen to me; I'm no Basque! Maybe you can get away with that drivel on them. You flew off your handle a little while back—when I tried to twit you about that Basque kid. As if I didn't know you were only playing! Tell me when the Double A ever held out a helping hand to a bosco? Why, if you could grab up these ranches down here for a song you'd do it quicker than scat. I know how things have gone along this creek. These Basques have caught you, time after time, taking more than your share of water. You need it! You ought to have twice as much as you've got. You'd like to get every drop of it; but even with your pull in the courts you're afraid to tackle this. It isn't old Arrascada and his crowd who've held you back. No, sir! It's those ranchers along the Little Washoe. This creek is their big *aloë*. Without it that river would be bone dry by July. That's why the sign is up, 'Hands off!'" Bodine paused for breath. "Well," he went on, "now that we understand each other can we go on with this conversation without any more of that *Sunday school stuff*?"

Acklin smiled; but his eyes were gray, instead of their accustomed blue. The smile meant nothing.

"Seeing you're fully grown," he said, "I'll waive the 'Sunday school stuff.' What have you got up your sleeve?"

"Just this, Acklin. You and I can get every inch of water there is in this creek. And we'll make the law help us. I'll get the water I need, and you'll get enough to irrigate the entire upper end of the valley. Soon as these Basques find their water is gone they'll throw up the sponge. Of course they'll fight for a while; but in the end you'll buy up their places for a package of gum. Now, if you're willing to talk turkey, you come to my place in the morning. Think it over. No need telling you what I've got on my mind if you're not interested. I'm going to leave you here. *Adios.*"

Acklin rode on. When he reached the Bull's Head he retired to the little room that served him as an office, and smoked many pipefuls as he pondered over the astuteness of Mr. Bodine.

What the fellow had told him did not cause Acklin a moment's worry. He had said nothing but what the merest tyro in Paradise knew of his needs and dreams. But while he dismissed Bodine's talk lightly, he took the man seriously enough.

"He's a blow-hard," he muttered to himself. "He's theatrical; he'll be a bad loser, too. Yes, sir, Bodine, your ego is entirely too large. I think you'll cheat, but *will* you shoot—and inquire afterward; or do it in the back, and make the inquiring unnecessary? Well, we'll see. I shouldn't wonder but you're the bird I have been waiting for."

The Webster Creek rancher had touched fire to plans long dormant in Acklin's mind. He smiled at Bodine's patronizing of him. If what Bodine had to tell him was as he expected he knew the final outcome would be such that a little lording now by that individual was a cheap enough price to pay.

In the clean blue and white morning Acklin rode to Webster Creek. Far off down the valley the whitewashed buildings of the Rancho Buena Vista and its distant neighbors glistened in the sun. Lowering skies with their sinister clouds of black

would have been more appropriate for this meeting.

"All right, Acklin," Bodine answered in reply to the other's question. "I'll put my cards on the table. Here they are. I'm going to turn that water back into the Webster! I've been over the spot where the creeks used to fork a hundred times. Nature changed that water in one night. I'll do it quicker than that. There is nothing but sand and small rock there. Two days after it is done, no man on earth can prove that old Lady Nature didn't twist it for the second time. These Basques were satisfied to take what she gave them once. By God, they'll have to be satisfied a second time! I won't have any cloudburst to help me out. They can think I turned it; but they won't be able to prove it; not if I can keep them away for a few days. Remember all the time, too, that the State says I am to have fourteen inches of water here. No one has ever proved that I haven't the right by law to turn that water back. Only, when I turn it back, I'm going to turn all of it. That's where you are going to be interested. Webster Creek peters out in that sink two miles below here. Once the water is in this creek it isn't 'contiguous water' to any stream on earth. Between us we'll take what we please and let the balance go to the devil. My boys will be here in a day or so, they'll do this job. They won't talk, either. I'll tip you off the night I intend to do it. You be there, or send your foreman. Just so I'll know I don't stand alone."

Acklin bent over and picked up a stick. With it he drew in the sand at his feet a rough map of the valley.

"It's almost due east from here to the old forks of these creeks. But right here, just as Webster Creek neared the other one, it turned north. For almost half a mile they paralleled each other before they met. Your line follows this creek across the valley, only it keeps straight on right into those foothills. That means that Webster Creek flowed through your property for that half mile. That's right, ain't it?"

Acklin nodded in assent.

"Well, when the night comes I want you to have your men ride your line. Don't let any one through. Keep your boys there

for a few days. Pass the word that some one's runnin' an iron on your stuff. That'll be excuse enough. We'll be safe then."

"But what about the morning after? As soon as the water drops the Basques will come on the run. They won't wait for the law."

"Let 'em come! It means a fortune to us. We've got to expect a fight. There'll be gun-play and hell for fair. I'm willing to risk it. Are you?"

Acklin got to his feet and brushed the dust from his corduroys.

"Bodine," he said, "you underestimate what this fight will be. Old José will rally his crowd around him for a real war. They can't live without that water. I've been through these affairs before; I know what they mean. There will be reprisals; cattle will be killed or run off. It will take a lot of my men. The whole routine of the place will be scrambled; and that's got to be ironed out before the fall round-up is on. You keep still for a couple of days. I'll give you my answer then."

Although by this arrangement the matter rested, neither man waited to act.

Acklin had not even reached home before Bodine had started Shorty on his way to the Malheur Lakes, to find Gloomy and his other men. And once Acklin had reached the Bull's Head, he immediately sent for Morrow, his foreman.

"Cash," he said, "we've been thick-headed. This fellow Bodine has put his finger on the thing we should have seen first shot."

He repeated their conversation to him.

"Don't that beat all!" Cash exclaimed. "With all of the water flowing into the Webster, and petering out in the sink, why, we wouldn't have to give a whoop for those fellows down on the Washoe. Webster Creek and the Little Washoe River don't get within ten miles of each other. It was just a case of whole hog or none. We're getting too refined."

"Well, I'm tempted to risk it, Cash. Suppose we string along for a while. Let him and his men do the actual work. You just drop around about the time they are there—you know, casual-like—if you ever have to swear to it. In the meantime send

some of the boys down to the Benoist water-hole. We are having trouble enough with the calves. Don't tell them anything else is in the wind. Give them the word not to let any one through. Make Skip the straw boss down there. I rather fancy him. We can go that far without a hitch. If Bodine turns the water you run a drift fence along our line across the valley. Straight east and west with those dead trees is near enough. We've got the wire and posts. Most of the boys will be back from the north to-morrow. You can get that fence up in a hurry if you have to."

"You leave that to me," Cash cut in. "Soon as the fence is up I'll drive enough stock into the valley to make that fence look on the square. Say, sounds like old times, getting ready for a war like this. How your pa enjoyed it. But, honest, I hate to see Old Ironsides get it in the neck. Old José is such a white Basque. But as your pa used to say, 'Business is like marriage. You got to take the bitter with the sweet.'"

Acklin turned back to his desk when Morrow had left. He pursed his lips as he thought of José and Mercedes. If this deal went through—and with his money and political power, it would—well, she'd be his to a certainty. Paradise Valley would be his. He'd be its feudal lord even as he was the lord now of a domain larger than the Balkans.

The thought brought the perspiration to his brow. He was about to steal from her; but he stole as did the robber barons of old, from the many, that he might have riches to pour into the lap of his favorite one.

But all his musing carried one reservation; he remained the lord!

CHAPTER IV.

"STICK 'EM UP!"

TEN days later a stranger crossed the desert from Golconda. He headed due north for the Benoist water-hole. He knew he was entering Paradise Valley by forbidden ways. The hint that he take the south road had reached him a day back. Rumor said the Double A was losing un-

told numbers of calves. Therefore, crossing Double A country without the official Acklin "O. K." was not being done. Henry Adams and old man Acklin had been monarchs of more than they surveyed, both figuratively and actually, for so long that no one questioned any right the Double A arrogated to itself.

They had learned early in life that though it is well to know the law, it is even better to know the judge. Other cow outfits had disappeared, but the mighty Double A empire had survived, proving that the younger Acklin had learned his lesson well.

It was not the stranger's whim to oppose him. By the merest chance he had taken the north fork at Wyand's. The willows ahead of him, he surmised, marked the water-hole. North, over the rise, he would find the valley.

He saw his horse ahead at a hard gallop. He found that the spring had made a small pool in the willows. He swung to the ground and loosened the cinches, but almost instantly the animal lifted his dripping muzzle and turned an inquiring eye behind him. The stranger followed suit. In the shadow of the trees two men sat.

The older of the two, a black-visaged fellow, spoke: "Howdy, stranger!"

It was Skip Lavelle, Acklin's straw boss.

"Howdy!" Kildare responded in the same flat, tell-nothing tone in which he had been accosted. His keen eyes took in the rifles reposing so conveniently in their laps, the soiled cards, and the interrupted game of monte.

The man who had addressed him got to his feet.

"What's your name, stranger?"

"Kildare—Blaze Kildare."

"Yuh ain't aimin' to linger around here, be yuh?"

Blaze eyed him thoughtfully as he drawled his reply: "Why, that all depends, don't it?"

He turned and started to lift the saddle off his horse.

"No use takin' that down, mister; may nit!"

For answer Kildare pulled it to the ground.

"Now listen to me, *machacho*," he

purred. "I'm going to breathe my horse, and we're going to drink our bellies full of water before we light out of here. What's all the big excite, anyways? I got a permit to cross this country."

"Let's see it," Skip and the other—Chet Devine—demanded.

"Now, what did I do with that permit?"

Blaze then took his hat off, and peered into it.

"Oh, yes!" He laughed. "*Here it is!*"

And in his hand Kildare held a derringer that had been strapped in his sombrero.

"Stick 'em up!" he said in velvety tones.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Skip began.

He stopped short, and instinctively Blaze sensed that some one was back of him; but he dared not turn around. Before Skip could recover his tongue a voice droned in sweet and dreadful tones in Kildare's ear: "That's good! That's awfully good! It's your turn to elevate, stranger!"

Blaze felt a gun-barrel boring into his neck. He obliged with alacrity. With nimble fingers his guns were taken from him.

This detail attended to the man at his back continued not unpleasantly:

"Take your hands down, and shake. I'm Cash Morrow, the foreman of the outfit these innocent little lambs belong to; but I can appreciate art when I see it. Shake!"

The bronzed, lean, sinewy Cash, for all his years, was a fit mate for the big man before him. Kildare grinned at him as Cash handed back his guns.

"Sure 'nough. I didn't know I was giving a show," he said easily, with the familiarity bred of the desert. "I'm mighty sorry, I discommoded your boys, Cash. I thought maybe they were some of those Basque sheepmen I hear this valley is loaded up with."

The delicious twinkle, which was one of his happiest mannerisms, came into Kildare's eyes as he uttered this rank falsehood. Chet and Skip were as uncomfortable as two bashful schoolboys. A laugh from the direction of the lower end of the willows was little calculated to restore their equanimity.

"Basque sheepmen!" a voice exclaimed mockingly.

A freckled face topped by a shock of red hair appeared above a green mahogany bush. The red-haired one sized up Blaze.

"Say, pardner," he asked, "who are you ridin' for?"

There was a noticeable drawl in Kildare's voice; an ease of expression that made him at home among these buckaroos. Also there was that elision of unnecessary words, and at the same time an indirection of approach to the main subject, which stamped him desert-bred.

"Why"—and although he answered the man with the flaming hair, his eyes followed Cash—"I'm riding for the Double A, if the foreman gets the right dope. We"—nodding toward his horse—"been getting our eats from the Lonely O up in Monty. Old Ted reckoned I'd wind up here."

"Take him on, Cash," the owner of the freckles urged, coming out of the shelter of the bushes. "Chet and Skip ain't no darn use, nohow, except to help Chink Charlie in the cook-house. You'll save one man's wages."

"You lay off the boys, Melody," Cash cut in. "They'll both make hands yet. Although that hat trick is older than I am. It'll be forty and cakes until the fall roundup is over, Kildare. Are you on?"

Blaze grinned.

"You've sure hired a man, mister."

"You'll double that if you throw a wise crap," Melody added. "To-day is pay-day, and pay-day aim is poor, or you wouldn't have got away so easily with the hat trick."

"Skip will tell you what to do," Cash went on. "You better drift down into the valley to-night, Skip. String out along the old Webster wash. Don't let any one through. Here, Kildare, you take my rifle."

"What, Basques?" Blaze questioned.

"Basques will do," Cash nodded. "I'll be down in the morning."

He mounted his horse and rode off.

"Here's where the boscos get it," Melody said gloomily as he made coffee for Blaze. Skip and Chet were asleep. "All this talk of losin' stock is bunk. We're just gettin' ready for another grab. I got eyes and sense."

"Land?" Blaze queried.

"No. We got all the land in the world. It's water this time."

As Blaze ate, Melody explained himself, and his surmise was more correct than he knew: "There wasn't a thing in the wind until this fellow buys in the old Webster place."

"I heard down in Golconda that Hank had sold it," Blaze smiled. "He's been drunk ever since. Sounds as though he must a met up with somebody from the effete East."

"No, not this *hombre*. He throws a mean leg over a horse. He's Western by his talk. Too talky for me, though. Says he's goin' to ranch it. Can't do that without water. The big boss and he's been gettin' thick. We're goin' to have trouble. If you're done let's ride up and have a look at the valley."

Melody pointed out the broken edge of dead willows and buckthorn that marked the spot where Rebel Creek had divided its water in the past, and sent part of its precious burden across the heart of the valley.

They sat in their saddles and smoked as the red-haired man talked.

"That's a big place there in the bend, just before Rebel Creek gets to the river," Blaze drawled. He could see the irrigation-ditches which crisscrossed the land as though they were ribbons of silver that bound it together.

"That's the Rancho Buena Vista. Wait till you see the girl that lives there—Old Ironsides's daughter. She's the reason they named this place Paradise. Her daddy is the king-pin of the Basques. He's all right, is José. Only bosco I ever sawvied. He's got a son, too. Always pullin' on the bit, that boy. Too much fire in him! Then there's a blind kid—Basilio. No mother either. Pretty tough that, eh? I knew the old lady. Wasn't any Basque. Guess that's how the señorita gets her spunk. But wait till you see this Mercedes girl. Man, when I look at her I don't miss sugar. She's sweet. . . . G'wan you ole fool," he growled to his horse. "Let's go back."

"You go on, Melody. I'm going down to the river and let my horse roll around in the water. He needs it if I'm going to use him to-night."

"Keep your eyes open. I got a bunch some of these Basques ain't dumb to what's goin' to be pulled."

CHAPTER V.

MERCEDES THE ALLURING.

THE first cool hint of evening reached Kildare as he picked his way along the Little Washoe. The water gurgled at his feet. Both horse and man became anxious to sport in it. The river narrowed directly ahead of him. It was a likely place for a swim. There were willows on the opposite bank. He pressed his knees into his horse's sides and was about to ford the stream when the animal threw back its ears. It was an unmistakable sign. Some one was coming! Kildare reached for his gun. As he did so, he heard a child crying. He wheeled his horse and sent him along the soft bank about fifty yards to where the river turned. What he beheld caused him to shake with laughter. He put away his gun guiltily.

A burro stood knee-deep in the middle of the river. Marooned on his back was a frightened child, madly clutching a fishing-pole in one hand, while in the other he held a string of small bass. With his tiny heels he beat the burro's sides, and alternately shrieked and cried at him to move. Struggling in the water at the burro's head was a girl; the most beautiful girl Blaze had ever seen.

She had taken off her shoes and stockings. Bare-legged, her dress held high about her waist, she yanked and pulled at the bridle-rein as she poured forth in voluble Spanish, and more explicit Americanese, a torrent of words.

It was the Señorita Mercedes and Basilio. Early that morning the lad had begged his sister to go fishing. The sloughs along the river were running full, and he was fisherman enough to know that the bass would be biting. The boy and his sister had been on their way home when the burro had called a halt.

Blaze knew the child was in no danger, so he sat and watched them. He guessed by her coloring that the girl was a Basque;

but there was none of that shy, languid manner about her he had so often observed in the women of her race.

The sight of the crying boy, the struggling girl, the fishing-poles, and the pathetic little string of fish warmed something within him. He had turned his back on childhood and the comforts of a sheltered life years and years ago, yet he loved children. How poignantly this fishing-party brought back his own boyhood! How he envied the thoughtless little beggar on the burro! He would have loved to roll up his breeches and wade in and fight the burro with them.

Neither the girl nor the boy had seen him. Suddenly the girl slipped, as she tugged at the rein, and sat down unceremoniously in the water. Blaze laughed outright at that, and then, unmindful of his clothes, jumped in and picked her up.

Mercedes had been quick to hear his laugh, and almost as quick to retort. Now that the stranger held her in his arms, however, and she could see the twinkle in his friendly eyes, a feeling of awe and embarrassment filled her. Unconsciously she tried to draw her wet dress about her bare legs.

When Blaze had set her on the bank, he smiled despite himself. Mercedes's intuition told her there was only kindness back of that smile. She felt her own mouth relax, and they both laughed.

Fifty yards away he had thought her beautiful; now that she was so near he found her entrancing.

The finely carved nose, her well drawn chin—yes, he looked away and remembered them; but the thing that set his heart heating was not her face or her flashing eyes; it was the unbroken, unsophisticated spirit of her. He had lived in the wilds, and knew its creatures well enough to sense in her a vague similarity to them.

His discovery of her and the ensuing incident had taken only a few seconds, but even so he had half guessed who she was. He saw that the little fellow was blind. It served to bring Melody's words back to him.

"You are not frightened?" he asked.

"Oh, no, señor," she answered with a smile. "But the baby—see?"

"I'll get him off in a second; then we'll try to persuade the burro."

Blaze waded out to get the boy. As he reached up his hands to lift him he spoke.

"Here we are, Basilio," he said. "Don't drop those fish now."

Mercedes felt a delicious thrill pass through her as she listened to his voice. She saw her brother wrap his arms about the big man's neck. It came back to her then as a second thought that he had addressed the child by his name. And yet the man was a stranger. She had never seen either him or his horse in the valley before.

Basilio had stopped crying. Something in Blaze's voice reassured him. And then, too, Blaze had emphasized what to the boy was the most imperative need—to save the fish. A second later he set him on his feet beside his sister.

"There we are," he said with a laugh, "safe and sound, fish and all. Now we'll make Mr. Burro move."

He drew his six-gun and, holding it back of the animal's ears, pulled the trigger. The burro leaped for shore as if he had been shot out of a cannon.

"Ha, Capitán! *Por Dios*, you move quick enough now," Mercedes trilled.

Capitán stood on the bank, waving his long ears in Blaze's direction, apparently determined that he would not be taken by surprise a second time. Wet, but laughing and happy, Kildare waded ashore. The girl regarded him with a smile as he stood before her, the water pouring from his clothes in tiny streams. Her eyes caused Blaze to look down at himself. He was a sorry sight.

"Shucks," he said, ruefully; "now I've gone and got my feet all wet."

Mercedes had pulled on her shoes and stockings, and now, while one arm was around Basilio, with her free hand she sought to tuck her rebellious hair into place.

"Did the man shoot Capitán?" the child asked timidly.

"What, shoot that good twelve-dollar-and-a-half burro? No, sir!" Blaze asserted. "I just creased his ears for him. When you say *arre* to him, now, he'll move."

"Señor," Mercedes asked, "how you know the baby's name?"

Blaze hung his head sheepishly.

"Why, missy," he stammered, "I just guessed at it. But I reckoned I knew who you were as soon as I saw you. I allowed he was your brother, too."

"You are a stranger, though, eh?"

"Er—yes. I was taking my first look at Paradise when I met you. I guess I better be on my way," he concluded, hoping to turn the conversation.

Mercedes had no such intention.

"How you know me, then, señor?" she pursued.

"Well, you see a—er—a man once told me, that"—Blaze knew his feet were stepping on each other in embarrassment—"some day I'd meet a Basque girl here, with beautiful black hair—and black eyes—and pearly white teeth—'Yes, and when you do,' he said, 'you'll know why they call this place Paradise.'"

Blaze regarded his twitching feet.

"And when I saw you," he went on with eyes averted, "I knew he hadn't lied. I guess that's how I knew you were Miss Mercedes."

The girl's long lashes dropped over her eyes.

"*Virgin santa*," she murmured softly. "But you say very nice things, señor—"

"Blaze."

"Señor Blaze," she said.

Kildare's horse had not moved from the spot where Blaze had dropped the rein. He held his head erect, ears expectant. His master's continued interest on the other side of the little stream seemed to worry him. He pawed the ground, and when that failed to earn him a word, he whinnied.

Blaze whistled so low that Mercedes barely heard it. Instantly the horse came to him and allowed the girl to stroke his head. Blaze lifted Basilio into the empty saddle.

"He's safe up there," he assured her. "My Man likes children."

"What a strange name for a horse!" Mercedes said.

"We are old pals. Gentle as a girl, isn't he?" Blaze paused for a moment. "Yes," he went on, "a sight gentler than some I used to know."

It was Mercedes's turn to look away.

"You remember them still, eh, señor?"

Blaze shook his head and smiled. Before he could answer, the hoof-beat of a horse being driven at furious speed interrupted him. Mercedes got to her feet and took Basilio out of the saddle.

"This will be my brother Esteban, or one of our vaqueros. Maybe some day you will try and find the Rancho Buena Vista, eh?" she added naïvely.

"Some day," Blaze answered. "And I'll try hard enough to find it, too."

Mercedes blushed under her tan.

The oncoming horse splashed through the water, covering them with a mist of silver spray. On his back sat Esteban, a thin, wiry, narrow-hipped youth. He leaped to the ground and, staring inimically at Blaze, launched into a tirade of excitable Spanish. The girl saw that he was upset and tried to restrain him.

"*Callar!*" she cried. "Hush! Have you gone mad?"

Blaze had a fair smattering of Spanish and of the universally understood Mexican idioms which the Basques had adopted, but he was unable to follow the rapid words Esteban continued to shower upon his sister. He did catch the reiterated *el agua* (water), and *'cequia madre* (mother-ditch). It meant only one thing. The Basques did suspect their danger.

But Esteban found himself in quite the same position with Mercedes as did the boy with the horn. He had cried wolf so often that his sister refused to believe that things were as bad as he painted them.

When her brother had finished, she tried to tell him that Blaze was a stranger and to explain how he had helped Basilio and her. Esteban thanked Blaze with some show of gratitude. He swung into his saddle and caught the child up beside him. Mercedes got on Capitán's back. With Esteban leading the burro, they started off.

"You come to the hacienda some day," Basilio called back. "I know where there's lots of fish."

Mercedes looked at her brother for confirmation of the invitation.

"You will be welcome if you come, señor," Esteban answered.

With a tightening of the heart Blaze

watched the girl go. He tarried to roll a smoke. Swimming had lost its attraction. Melody's talk came back to haunt him. If the freckle-faced man was right, the future was black enough for this girl.

"Basques seem to have a habit of always getting the worst of it," he mused.

It never had mattered to him before. He thought of his own possible future part in this conflict. His mouth straightened into a grim smile as he realized how his being a Double A man would temper her opinion of him when she discovered it. Yet what difference would the little weight that he could throw on either side make? If Acklin was intent on driving out the Basques, he would bring forces enough to win without him.

There was going to be a fight. It was in the air. It meant something to Kildare now. He couldn't go away. Paradise Valley had a claim on him. He had not come there by accident.

My Man reveled in the cool waters of the Washoe as Blaze dreamed on the bank. The shadows deepened. The man's mouth lost its hardness. Old memories of home and the brother he had raised and lost came to him.

"Gee, kid," he murmured, "you'd like her, too. I can't see her get a raw deal. I suppose it's as natural for some men to hog it all as it is for fish to swim, but if anybody steps on her toes I'm going to get personal. I'll chalk that down so I won't forget it, either."

My Man stared at him curiously. Blaze laughed half-heartedly.

"Old-timer," he said, "I guess I've gone crazy. But she was sweet, wasn't she?"

He got to his feet and stretched himself.

"What's the use?" he said deprecatorily. "A rolling stone hasn't any business thinking such things."

CHAPTER VI.

"FREEZE WHERE YOU ARE!"

STRETCHED out around the tiny fire in the willows, heads pillow'd on their saddles, the four men waited. The long twilight was over. From the nodding

sage came the sad, plaintive cry of the whippoorwill, lonely and foreboding in its three-toned monotony.

Punctual, almost to the minute, the night wind came whispering, sweet with the fragrance of purple sage and clean brown earth. To the eastward the crystalline peaks of the Santa Rosas, fringed with a delicate tracery of stunted cedars, stood outlined, glowing in the witchery of the desert night. The world waited for the wonder they withheld. And then suddenly valley and mesa were bathed in vibrant light. The round, heavy, golden-yellow moon hung low above the mighty range; the cedars no longer trees, but gossamer webs of silver.

Skip yawned and got to his feet.

"Late enough," he sighed. "The moon's up. Let's go!"

In Indian file they left the shelter of the trees. Half an hour later they forded the Little Washoe and held north for the dry wash of the Webster.

The ghost-like willows that lined the old wash rustled and creaked in the wind; but the kindly moon had touched their limbs with its magic.

Skip held up his hand.

"That fringe of dead willows marks the wash, Kildare. Melody, you side him east aways. Better let him stick around Rebel Creek. It's the least likely place for any one to come through. Chet will trail me. I'll hang out around the Winnemucca road. If we have any trouble, it'll be there—freighter or somethin'. I'll drop Chet about halfway over."

He turned to Chet.

"You and Melody keep in touch with each other. You can see a long ways in this light. Come on!"

He wheeled his horse and loped off after the receding Chet. Blaze and Melody jogged on. The red-haired one was quiet, serious. Kildare had said nothing about meeting Mercedes, but he had thought of little else ever since. A rabbit scurried across the trail ahead of them. Melody came up alert, his hand on his gun. Blaze smiled.

"Even a rabbit scares you to-night, eh, Melody?"

Melody shivered. "Just fidgety," he grumbled.

They rode into a little arroyo. Blaze snapped a match with his thumb.

"Take a squint at this picture, Melody. Is that Bodine?"

Melody shook his head. He took the photograph in his own hands.

"Nope," he repeated. "Nature didn't spare him any either, did she?" he chuckled. "No! This fellow Bodine is tall and wiry. About the size of the Big Boss."

The match flared out.

"Say," he asked, "what made you think that was Bodine?"

"Nothing. Just a chance."

They rode on without speaking for a spell.

"Are you aimin' to meet up with that bird?"

Blaze nodded. "I'd sure admire to do that."

"Humph! It's a big country."

"I got lots of time."

Ten minutes later they came to Rebel Creek. Melody lay down to drink his fill for the night.

"Here's the source of all evil," he punned. "We own all this valley above the old Webster; every foot of it. And back of those ranges? Say, man, you could ride for a week before you got through seein' Double A steers." Melody threw away his half-burnt cigarette. "Guess I'll fan it back. You meet me every now and anon, in that little arroyo where you flashed the picture."

Blaze got out of his saddle. A rock for a backrest, he sat in the shelter of the willows and smoked. Melody faded away in the distance. My Man munched the tender, green grass, which grew lush in the creek-bottom. Minutes dragged by and no one came. He yawned and nodded. The sound of the browsing horse always prevented him from falling asleep.

Time after time he met Melody in the arroyo. Nothing happened to break the monotony of their vigil. The moon rode high. Blaze knew it was nearing midnight. Innumerable cigarettes had parched his throat. When he reached the creek again he got down to drink; but the water, which

had been so clear and cold, was muddy to the taste. He struck a match. He could see that his tongue had not deceived him. Some one had crossed the stream above him!

Blaze listened. The wind bore him no sound. Quickly and silently he broke open his rifle. The breach slid in and out in its oiled perfection. He snapped it shut. Ten seconds later man and horse picked their way upstream.

It was pitch-black in the willows and brush-filled crook-bottom; but it would have been foolhardy to risk the open. He knew he would be visible at close to three hundred yards in that light.

Blaze figured he had come half a mile or more when My Man stumbled. Any but a Western horse would have been down. He slid to the ground, rifle in hand, and went on, knowing his horse would be waiting there if he returned. Another hundred yards and he stopped. Was it the fallacious breath of the night wind or his own ears that had deceived him into hearing the sound of shod steel grating on rock and gravel? Intently he listened — a pause — and then, clear and unmistakable, it came again.

Kildare felt his pulse quicken. He edged to the moonlight. Not a hundred yards away loomed the whitened trees which stood beside the old Webster wash. He sensed from the contour of the country that the creek-bottom widened out here. A low mesa rose between him and the dead trees. He correctly reasoned that this barrier had caused that widening, the water swinging around to pass it.

Flat on all fours he crouched as he crawled to the mesa's rim. He was twenty feet above the water. Cautiously he peered over.

Kildare's breath stopped. Right below him seven men toiled in the water. Rebel Creek was being dammed!

The face of the mesa threw the creek bottom into shadow. Some one spoke. The voice was familiar. He craned his neck to hear. Too late he knew his mistake. The vagrant night wind eddying on the cañon wall laid heavy hands on his sombrero and sent it sailing down upon the

heads of the men below. The weight of the little gun inside the hat made it drop like a shot. A surprised voice retreated from its blow. Kildare knew he was discovered. Cries of rage and anger came up to him. His rifle crawled out beyond the crest, black and ominous to those below.

"Freeze where you are!" he cried. With his left hand he drew his six-gun and fired the three shots that would bring Melody and Chet rushing to his side. Below him one sought to steal away.

"Listen to me," he purred in dulcet tones, "I'll bust the first one of you that moves, and I don't care how soon you start running."

In an incredibly short time Melody dashed across the mesa. He saw Kildare with rifle to his shoulder.

"What is it?" he said huskily.

"Come here and see."

"That's pretty, ain't it?" Melody growled. "Say, who in hell are you fellows?"

There was no mistaking the voice that rolled up in answer to the red-haired one's question. It was Morrow's. He was thoroughly angry. "Melody," he called out vehemently, "who's that fool up there with the gun?"

Blaze and Melody exchanged glances.

"It's me—Kildare," the former shot back. "I didn't know I was making you sit so nice and pretty."

"My God!" Cash groaned. "Held up by my own man! What are you doin' here?"

Blaze explained about the water. The laugh was on Morrow. "Well, you get back to the willows and stay there. All this damn fool shootin' is likely to wake up somebody."

The two men rode away together. Melody shook his head. "I had it sized up about right, I guess."

"Did you recognize the others?"

"Sure! Bodine's crowd. The big fellow was Bodine. The *batalla grande* is about to begin."

Blaze stared ahead. "I suppose the Basques will be bumping into us in the early dawn."

"No, they won't know what they've lost

till mornin'. I heard once that they had a guinea hired to measure the water they ought to get."

Blaze smiled half-heartedly.

"Well, he'll be like the coon in 'Othello'; he'll find his occupation gone."

The weary-eyed Kildare waited out the hours. No one tried to get past him. It got to be five o'clock and yet the sky held only the murky gray the stars had left as they winked out. It grew cold in the creek-bottom. My Man moved about restlessly. To the east, black clouds sailed low about the range. A drop of rain splashed against his face. Even before he had produced his tarpaulin from his cached bed-roll, the rain came down in earnest; cold and blood-chilling in a way that only the mountain-desert knows.

Sitting in his saddle, his tarp about him, he warmed enough to smile at this break of fortune for the Double A. Rain in this country was the great eradicator.

And while Kildare smiled so grimly, Acklin, Bodine, and the solemn-eyed Cash laughed aloud. Every drop of rain was as manna from heaven. It was the last touch needed to make their work as flawless as the black art of the devil.

"What a godsend," Bodine cried, without a trace of irony.

"No," Acklin murmured unpleasantly. "It's the luck of the wicked: it's always good."

"Let them prove their case now," Buck sang. "Why, we don't even need that fence."

"Well, it will go up just the same," the sleepy Acklin mumbled.

In the ranch yard, a line of heavy freighting wagons were lined up, piled high with fence wire and posts. From the direction of the long barns came the teams, whiffle-tree chains jangling on the flinty ground, and rising above the clatter, the sharp, impatient cursing of a sorely tried teamster.

The foreman closed his watch with a click. "We'll move from here in twenty minutes. Better get a bite now," he said to Bodine.

It was long after seven when Blaze saw Cash and Bodine ride into sight. The rain had stopped, but the sky still held sullen

and gray. Kildare recognized the man with Morrow. In an indefinable way there was something vaguely familiar about him. Blaze wondered if the other man felt it too, because they scrutinized each other closely before Cash spoke:

"The wagon will be here in a few minutes. Widget will stir up some breakfast. Brent will relieve you. I'll send Melody and the rest of them back here. When you all have eaten, you can drift home and roll in. Skip will fix you up. Say, it's a wonder you didn't bump off somebody last night, Kildare."

"I wasn't even nervous, Cash. I'm slow on the trigger; but I aim to be pretty efficient when I get started."

"Your path will be covered with roses if you only remember to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. It's my way of judging whether a man is worth his salt or not. I fancy you'll do to take along with us."

The boys rode up at that instant, closely followed by the heaving wagon. Cash jogged over to see it safely across the creek. Bodine offered Blaze a cigarette.

"Cash told me about your part in that little show last night," he laughed. "You must have given the boys a thrill."

Bodine's cordiality grated on Blaze. For a brief second Kildare had thought the big man might be Acklin; but Cash would have made that known instantly. Blaze was tired and sour on the world after the long stretch; and the sight of this individual's pleasure in the morning, as well as a sudden inbred dislike for the man, led him to fire away at a guess:

"You were there then?"

Bodine stared at him for a while before his jaw relaxed.

"Don't be so positive. I'm not a Double A man."

"Now that makes my vote unanimous," Blaze drawled. "That little show was strictly a family party. I don't guess Cash would be exactly talkative about it."

The threat and implication were not lost on Bodine; but he chose to ignore them. Quite cleverly he retreated from his position by the means of bluff camaraderie.

"We'll see quite a lot of each other in

the next few weeks," he went on, "so I'll backwater on my whereabouts. I'm Buck Bodine. I bought the old Webster place a while back. You can guess where we line up."

Cash joined them, and he and Bodine went on. Blaze ambled over to where Widget was going through the motions that meant breakfast for him. The new hand was looked over by the boys, and, with the freemasonry of the cow-country, was given a nod and a greeting. Right or wrong, these men stuck by their first likes and dislikes. Brother Jones, timeworn but still effective, chewed the ends of his mustache.

"Say, son," he mumbled, "they's no hell like a cowboy hell, as it would seem you have lived to learn; but this outfit will add to your education. I am quite won to you by your kindly eye. It's a full month to pay-day. Seek my advice often and with consideration, if you would prosper. In me you see a man bent with age, and peniless, too, because of these young thieves. They draw their pay from the Double A, but they work the double-cross. Oh, yes, they do!"

Cries of "Liar!" and "Amen!" greeted this speech.

"Come and get it," Widget bawled. Brent cut out from the bunch, and the others paced away. Having eaten his fill, Blaze crawled under the wagon to sleep.

The sun was out and riding high by the time the four men headed for home. Half a mile east of the creek they met the fencing gang. There was no lost motion here. No sooner were the holes dug than the cedar posts were in place. Another man tamped down the ground around them. Drums of wire were mounted on a wagon. The teamster would cluck to his horses; the wagon would move ahead, the drums would revolve, and the busy hammers would send the staples home. There was art in its precision.

Noontime brought Blaze to the Bull's Head. No sign of rain lingered. It was hot. Green bottleflies droned in the white, plastered rooms above. MacGregor, the ranch blacksmith, was busy at his forge; but for him the Bull's Head appeared to slumber.

Melody had been silent for an hour, but as they tramped up the stairs, the nearness of a comfortable bed awakened life within him. In a mournful voice he bawled one of his saddest numbers:

"I lost my watch,
I lost my ring,
I lost my wife
And everything;
Oh, I got bad luck
Oh, I—"

The agony of his song brought Acklin to the door. He saw his new man. "That you, Kildare?" he asked. "Step in here a minute." The cut of Kildare's fighting jaw, his poise, and his calm, unemotional eyes told Acklin plainer than words that here was a buzz-saw when aroused; a man without excuses, hard-headed, and at his best when unbossed.

"Kildare," he began, "Cash says he fancies you. I've rarely ever found him mistaken. We're going to have trouble in the valley from now on. I want you to know where I stand. I ask no man to do for me what I wouldn't do myself. It's the rule on which this ranch is run. My father once said to me: 'I hate orders' and the giving of them, but sometimes they are necessary. And the man who can't take them without asking why is no fit man to have.' I've never found anything but wisdom in those words."

This was a tacit admission on Acklin's part that Blaze knew what had happened at the fork of the Webster. Kildare felt the question behind the words. He knew Acklin was asking him where he stood as plainly as though he had said so. Covertly the Big Boss watched his new man's face and saw a shadow of impatience cross it.

"I guess I understand you, sir," Blaze stated.

The "sir" was his way of showing that he had no liking for the lack of frankness in the Big Boss. He meant it to mark a difference between them, of his making, and not Acklin's.

"I'm glad you do." Acklin sensed the intent of that "sir." "You get some sleep now. I'll call you about five. I want you to go into Paradise to-night, just to hear the news. You're a stranger; you'll be

safe. I want to know what the talk is. I'll have a message for Bodine, too. No trouble finding the place."

CHAPTER VII.

AN ACE IN THE HOLE.

UNDER orders, Kildare took the road that led through the foothills to the river. Keeping to the south bank, he followed it until he came to the mouth of the Rebel. The wide shoal of sand the creek had carried there, the round, well-polished bowlders, and the deep marks of erosion in granite outcroppings told plainly enough that this had been a turbulent stream in the past. But now he could have stopped with his hands the trickle of water that wound through the dry sand.

Purposely he struck west below the Rancho until he came upon the well-traveled road that led into Paradise. It was the time of day when the ranchers in the valley were in the habit of going into town. More than one passed, giving Blaze a curt nod and a searching glance that was less than friendly. Before he reached the village he had met so many men that there could be no question what was bringing them in.

The town consisted of two general stores, a tiny, white church, a broken-down, third-rate hotel, and three saloons. About half a dozen buildings with store-fronts flanked the others on the main street. They had long since failed to house any profitable business and were now occupied as dwellings. Fifty or more small frame houses backed up this array.

Three hundred yards north of the town a shallow creek, a tiny branch of the Webster, cut across the road. Except after a heavy rain, or in the early spring when the winter snow was going off, it was dry. Springs alone could account for the rank growth of cottonwoods and poplars that hedged it in. In the lea of these trees the Mexicans, who worked out during the haying, or on the roads at irregular intervals, had their homes.

Blaze reined up in front of Chase's store. The post office was located there. Seven

or eight men lounged on the planked sidewalk in front of it. He gave them a nod and went in to drop his letters. Old man Chase and his sons were busy, so that he passed out unnoticed.

Benavides's place was down the street several doors. A small crowd stood before it. Half an hour ago these Basques, excitable like all Southern races, had been noisy enough. They were glum now and silent only because they had talked themselves out.

The loss of the water had been discovered before noon. Several of them, Esteban included, had ridden up the creek to find the cause. They had not gone far before they ran into the Double A wire. Brother Jones had been waiting on the other side of it. He was hardly hospitable.

When they had sought to crawl under the fence, he had waved his gun with an alarming lack of regard for their safety.

"No, no, *niente, amigos*," he had cried. "You want to watch out, *cuidado!* I'm sorry; but I ain't foolish."

They had tried to engage him in further talk, but he had told them to go to Acklin and to several other destinations more remote. As a consequence, the Double A, and not Bodine, had become the object of their hatred. Remembering the past, it was not hard for them to lay this new outrage at Acklin's door. But like the sheep they owned, they needed a leader before they could strike back. Some of them had been in town all afternoon, drinking and cursing their luck. But whisky, contrary to the rules affecting most people, only seemed to calm them and make them more determined to fight for their rights. In this they showed how greatly they differed from the Mexicans especially, with whom they were often confused.

Blaze found the saloon filled. At a table six men played cards. They were the only ones present who seemed untouched by the general air of disaster.

Blaze bought a drink. He understood very little of the conversation going on about him; but that these men were worked up and only awaited a leader, he did not doubt for a moment.

The card game ended. Blaze caught the

reflection of the players in the fly-specked mirror over the back bar.

"You boys are too dod-gasted lucky for me," the smallest of them cackled. "I been going for the case card every time."

Benavides had been sitting in. He smiled at the man in the faded clothes. Faded was the correct word. His trousers were baggy; his hat warped out of shape, the band of it raveled and wind-whipped; but one forgot these and remembered only the lack of color in him. Everything he wore seemed to have settled into a sedate greenish-gray; that is, save for his eyes. They still held their hazel hue.

"Joe," the Basque called, as the little man got up, "have a drink on the house before you go. It's time for a celebration when you lose."

Blaze moved over, and the faded one edged into the bar beside him.

"I'll call that bluff," he cawed. "I was a child when you set 'em up the last time, you old tightwad."

In the mirror, Blaze could see that he had caught the little man's attention. It was half dark in the saloon, but he sensed the alertness in the other's eyes. Blaze reached for his glass to finish his drink.

"Well, if it ain't old Timberline," the little man exclaimed.

The sound of his old *nom de guerre* caused Blaze to freeze with his glass in mid-air. Until that second he would have staked his life that no man north of the Humboldt could have called him by that name.

Blaze set his drink down and turned to scrutinize his neighbor. Recognition came quickly.

"Joe Kent!" he cried. "What are you doing way over here, Tuscarora?"

"Why, I been over this-a-ways some time. What you doin' here?"

Blaze smiled and winked an eye at him.

"Side me out of town a ways and I'll let you guess. But lay off that Timberline. It belongs in my wicked past. I'm headed for Webster Creek. That out of your way?"

Benavides waved him good-by as he and Blaze left. Tuscarora was a fixture in the valley. He had won his sobriquet placing

over in the Tuscarora Range. His experiences there were only a small part of his education. For forty years he had roamed the desert. It had been his boast that he had missed only one gold rush in twenty years. He knew the old camps like Virginia City and Austin, as well as the more recent ones at Rawhide and Bullfrog.

In his time he had worked at all the odd jobs the desert knows; freighting, running a stage line, being a government trapper—all these had occupied different periods in his life. He had put in one winter as a station agent down in Esmeralda County.

Although he lived in town he owned a small ranch on the Little Washoe. But for him the hotel would have closed, Joe being its only regular guest. Old man Pasquale, the proprietor, refused to dispossess him.

"What's on, son?" he asked, when they had crossed the little bridge north of town. "You acted back there as if I had handed you a jolt."

"You sure gave me a surprise," Blaze admitted. "You heard about the kid, I suppose?"

"Yeh! Too bad! That ain't bringin' you over here, is it?"

"It's taken me a lot of places. I hired out to the Double A yesterday."

"Yeh?" There was frank disbelief in Kent's eyes. "What else?"

"Nothing much. Just that and the kid. I haven't forgotten him."

"Now looke here, Blaze!" Joe exclaimed as he pulled up his horse. "You don't belong in this fuss. And it's gonna be a fuss. There'll be killin' before it's through. Acklin's over his head. As long as it don't mean anythin' to you, why not get out of it?"

"I'm playing a hunch, that's all! I've got to see it through. Anyway, Joe, I never was much of a hand at running away."

"Course not. You'll get killed yet. Why don't you marry and settle down?"

The telltale twinkle came into Blaze's eyes.

"Is that what you've done?"

"There you are," Tuscarora scolded. "You never answered a straight question in all your life."

"They take the loss of the water pretty

bad back there, don't they?" Blaze countered, jabbing in the direction of Paradise.

"How'd you take the loss of your bank-roll and three squares a day? I'm no outsider in this. I've got a little place on the river. I know what it's going to do to me."

Blaze shook his head thoughtfully.

"I didn't think these Basques had a chance. Of course if you're going to string along with them, you old weasel, they may get somewhere. But remember, I'm no man's man but my own when it gets down to scratch. I'm not going to back out. You're the only man in this country that knows me. You forget Timberline and all the rest of it, Tuscarora. I'm just Blaze Kildare now."

"You never give up, do yuh?" Kent exclaimed. "I know how you feel, Blaze; but two years is a long time to stick to one idea. It's goin' to be tough to see us lined up against each other; and that's what it's goin' to mean. This won't be any children's party. Acklin can't rob us that-a-ways."

They rode on for a mile or more before Blaze spoke.

"Why don't you take the thing to court? This is still the United States, isn't it? You've got the law."

"Law?" Joe mocked. "The country is smeared with it; but it's all made for the other fellow. But don't you fret. We'll get started. I'll have every man-jack in the valley down to the Rancho Buena Vista to-morrow night. I'll see to it, too, that we don't make any small-town affair of this row. I been county commissioner twice. I know how Acklin's got things tied up around here. He's strong enough down in Carson, too. But I'll take a lot of beating before I'm dead. Election's coming on soon, Tom Brand is out for district attorney down in Winnemucca. Acklin and the Anaconda Cattle Company may beat him. Still, he's got a following. Folks have had about enough of your San Francisco millionaires. These big ranches will be broken up some day. Then this State will amount to something. I know this country better than most. You wait! We'll bring water here all the way from the south fork of the Owyhee when these big holdings have been cut up. If you was a decent law-abiding citi-

zen with four or five kids, you might be interested."

They had almost reached the road where Blaze was to turn to the left. Tuscarora's words brought back to Kildare a picture of Mercedes. The thought of what she faced stiffened him.

The little man caught the click of his friend's jaws.

"Don't shoot!" he mimicked. "I didn't know I was riding you so hard. There's your road, old-timer."

Joe's jocularity brought the smile back to Blaze's face.

"Anyway," he laughed, "I won't shoot in the back."

"That's why I wonder how you and Acklin are going to get along. That surprises you, eh? Well, you wait till he gets pressed. I knew his old man; so I wouldn't put anything past his son."

Tuscarora bit off a piece of his tobacco by way of saying good-by.

"And just so you won't get to thinking that I'm ready for the junk-pile," he went on, "let me tell you that your friend Bodine is in this deal up to his neck. But he's only a stool-pigeon for the Double A. The Basques blame it all on Acklin." Joe shook his head. "Pretty foxy of him to send a dummy out to buy in the place and hold it down until the Double A could turn the water on. I'll bet Acklin's got a deed for that ranch in his safe this minute. If he hain't, this Buck Bodine will wake up some morning to find himself chasing his own tail."

They drew apart. Blaze waved his hand.

"You come see me some time, Blaze," Tuscarora called. "You always got an ace in the hole in me."

CHAPTER VIII.

"LAW, HELL!"

BLAZE jogged on. When he turned a moment later to look back, Tuscarora had become a gray blur on the swaying sage.

"Just the same old bag of bones he used to be," he murmured wistfully. "Kid always liked him, too."

Pictures of Laramie, the park, Washakie Needles, the Buffalo Fork of the Snake, and memories of the winning fights they had been through together filled Blaze's mind and made him oblivious to his surroundings. He came up with a start when My Man's feet splashed through water.

Webster Creek paralleled the road about three hundred yards to the north. Blaze headed his horse for it.

He found the creek running over its banks. The adjacent soil had become so thoroughly dried out during its ten years' drought that the rush of water ate into it voraciously, and in some places the banks had crumbled away entirely.

Blaze got back on the road, musing as he went along on the Aladdin-like effect of last night's work. He continued to see evidences of it time after time. My Man's hoofs kicked up a spray in at least a dozen places before Blaze sighted the buildings of the Webster ranch.

It was late twilight when he walked his horse into Bodine's yard. Webster Creek cut across it between house and barn. The place being new to him, he stopped momentarily before crossing the stream.

The incongruity of all this water, without sign of living green thing, shrieked aloud. Ahead of him the house bulked dark and silent. From its windows came no ray of lamp or candle. Blaze thought it strange that the place should be deserted at this time of the evening. He sent My Man prancing through the water and was about to cry out to see if he could arouse any one when a short, bandy-legged shadow detached itself from the blackness of the house and dashed madly for the barn.

Instinctively Blaze reached for his gun. It was plain to him that the noise of his horse's feet had surprised the man into his precipitous flight. Kildare had caught only a brief glimpse of him. Recognition was impossible in the light that held. Nevertheless Blaze felt his muscles tense as he tried to recall the figure of the man. He could not forget the shadow's legs. They were too peculiar, and the picture of them remained in his mind as a definite thing. He would have pursued the thought further; but a voice boomed out from the steps

of the house asking what he wanted. Blaze recognized it for Bodine's.

"I've got a letter for you," Blaze answered. "This is Kildare."

"Come ahead! I'll light a lamp."

Blaze grinned. The place was waking up with a vengeance. He saw a match flicker in the kitchen. Bodine had the lamp lighted by the time Blaze dismounted.

"You didn't come through Paradise?" the rancher asked skeptically.

"I sure did! Left there about an hour ago."

"How are they takin' it?" There was genuine concern in Bodine's voice.

"They're stunned. They'll mill around for a day or two until they find a leader; there'll be trouble then! The word has been passed for a big powwow to-morrow night at the Rancho. I wouldn't be surprised if the old don throws the thing into the courts from the start. From what I hear, he's got the backing of all the other ranchers."

"Courts—the old fool! Why doesn't he fight it out?"

"They wouldn't have a chance," Blaze said, obviously drawing Bodine on. "The law is the best way, isn't it?"

"Law, hell! That's no way! Who wants the law when you can do without it?"

Blaze sat down on the porch while Bodine went inside to read Acklin's letter. He fancied he saw some one staring at him from the blackness of the barn door.

"You tell Acklin my boys are in the Buttes now," Bodine stated when he came out. "I'll be over to the Bull's Head tomorrow."

Blaze made no effort to leave. By even the shortest way, he knew it would be after ten before he reached the Bull's Head. He had not eaten, except for a piece of jerky

(To be continued)

and a bowl of coffee, since morning. The appetizing odors coming from the kitchen were too much for him.

"I guess you won't have any trouble finding your way back home," Bodine intimated to speed his guest.

"Not on an empty stomach," said Blaze. "It's pretty near time to eat, isn't it?"

"Say, pardner," Bodine answered, "you ain't going to miss nothing if asking will get it for you. Come on in."

They went inside. Blaze eyed the sagehen cooking on the stove, but his curiosity more than his appetite had made him stay.

"You must have been expecting me," he said. "I see you got the knives and forks set for two. I thought you were alone."

Bodine turned suspiciously and searched Kildare's eyes. What he found in them seemed to reassure him.

"That's the way I housekeep," he mumbled as he fussed with the stove. "Supper on one side the table; breakfast the other. Wash 'em all up together. Let's eat."

Blaze drew out a chair that would leave him facing the window.

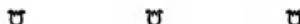
"Sit on the other side," Bodine cut in. "I'll be handy to the stove here, so I can hot up the coffee. I've got some biscuits in the oven."

The lie seemed to pass muster. Buck kept on wondering why Shorty had taken to his heels. He studied Kildare's face cautiously. The cowboy smiled. They ate in silence for a while. Blaze praised Bodine's cooking, not knowing Shorty had been the chef before his dash to the barn.

Blaze had been careful to note that the window had been closed when he sat down. Yet as he finished the last of the biscuits he felt the first touch of the cold night wind on the back of his neck.

The window was being slowly opened.

NEXT WEEK.)



RETRIBUTIVE ROMANCE

I ONCE despised romance, and kept such things
As love and kindred nonsense on the shelf.
I used to laugh at love-sick fellows, now
I do not feel so very well myself.

Philip Stiehl, Jr.



Hopeless Homestead

By JOHN HOLDEN

Author of "The Drifter," "The Boss of Camp K," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

IT was a mere coincidence that Constable Peter Kemp of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police happened to be in the Rodiscaw land office when the mysterious woman entered. He did not have any particular business there, just dropped in to enjoy a five minute chat with Billy Robinson, who combined the duties of Dominion land agent along with his more lucrative business of retail grocer, notary public, town assessor and real estate dealer.

Kemp had enjoyed a good deal of leisure that summer. No crime of any consequence had occurred in the little northern Alberta town or the surrounding district for more than six months. The newcomers—mostly homesteaders from the States—were law abiding and hard working farmers, and the older residents had long since

acquired a wholesome respect for the flaming red coat of the "mounties."

True, a case of petty thievery had been reported thirty miles down the Athabasca River at Hay Creek, but so far Kemp's superior officer had not ordered him to bring in the offender, and it seemed likely that Kemp would not make the trip for that purpose alone. The offense was too insignificant. The offender, a drunken sot named Calvin Hubbard, could be picked up at any time.

It was probably on account of the fact that real crime had been lacking for months that Kemp paid an extra amount of attention to the woman when she staved to Robinson that she wished to file on a quarter section of Dominion land. Not that she suggested crime—far from it—but her de-

sire to become a homesteader was a bit strange because she was decidedly not the type of woman who usually undertakes the task of converting wild land into a producing farm. She was a bit mysterious, and mystery always interested Kemp.

In the first place, she was very good looking, and it is only natural that a manly, upstanding bachelor of Kemp's masterful type should look at a prepossessing woman. Her features were regular, her complexion alluringly pink and white, her large eyes expressive and soft and kindly. Her attire was that of a city woman, and it fitted her well developed figure to perfection. In years she was probably in her late twenties, and it was plain that she had not wasted her life in idle pleasure. There was about her an air of competence, of large tasks undertaken and achieved, and yet she looked as thoroughly feminine as the most feather brained flapper in Rodiscaw. She was accompanied by Jake Gauthier, the local homestead locator.

"Name please?" Robinson asked her in the customary manner as he poised his pen over an application blank.

"Alice Carter," said the woman.

Kemp looked at her even more closely than before. He had always liked the name Alice.

"Miss or Mrs.?"

"Mrs."

"Must be a widow," thought Kemp.

"Have you seen this quarter section that you wish to take up as a homestead, Mrs. Carter?" the land agent queried.

"Yes."

"And have found that it answers your purpose?"

"Perfectly."

Jake Gauthier looked at her in a perplexed manner, but said nothing.

"All right—the legal description of it, please."

She gave it.

Robinson began to write, then suddenly stopped.

"Why—that quarter section—I know all about it—it's no good," he stated.

"Just what I told her," said Gauthier.

"Nevertheless it's the quarter section that I want," Mrs. Carter insisted.

Constable Kemp moved up a little closer to the counter. The mystery, instead of clearing, as he anticipated, was becoming deeper.

"But I don't understand," Robinson protested. "It's absolutely worthless for farming. It's nothing but the bald and rocky top of a high hill that can be seen up and down the river for miles. And, so far as I know, it's useless for every other purpose, too. Even if there were minerals or oil upon it, which there isn't, those rights are reserved to the government. If it's mere scenery you want, for a summer home, you can get better land that also overlooks the river."

"I've explained all that," said Gauthier. "We walked all over the place, and I pointed out to her how it isn't worth a hoot for anything at all."

Mrs. Carter assumed a patient expression.

"I appreciate your kindness, gentlemen, in warning me against an act that seems folly to you," she said. "I understand perfectly why you think I am throwing away my rights on worthless land, but it happens that I am not. I realize that only a few acres of this quarter section can be farmed, that it is inaccessible except by water, that it is all rocky and bleak and ugly, that I won't acquire rights to anything except the soil, that I can get just as good a view on better land, that, in fact, the place appears not to have one single redeeming quality. And yet it is precisely what I want."

"Sounds a bit mysterious," commented Robinson. "Do you mind telling us what you want it for?"

"I'd rather not," replied the woman.

Kemp's brow was furrowed in thought.

"If you'll pardon me for interrupting," he stated, "I think I know some good use that the place might be put to."

Mrs. Carter seemed a bit startled. She looked at him expectantly.

"What?" queried Robinson.

"Well, I've heard talk of an airplane line to the oil fields on the Mackenzie River. Perhaps the lady wishes to use her homestead for a landing place."

Mrs. Carter looked relieved.

"Great Scott, no!" said Gauthier. "She couldn't do that, constable. It's too rocky; not level enough."

The woman smiled at Kemp in a manner that made him feel foolish.

"If the war were still on, you could figure out that I'm a German spy and want to use it as a signal station," she commented teasingly.

"If you're quite sure that you want that worthless homestead, I suppose I'll have to give it to you," said Robinson as he prepared to resume his writing.

Mrs. Carter insisted that she did, and the land agent filled out the blank. She signed it with an air of satisfaction, paid the filing fee, and thanked Gauthier for his services in helping her secure it. She then asked where she could procure a motor boat, lumber for a shack, a pistol, and the services of a carpenter.

"A pistol?" queried Kemp. "You're not going to shoot anybody, are you?"

"I hope not," she replied. "Certainly not except in self defense."

"You don't seem sure about it. Are you expecting that you may have to shoot some one in self defense?"

"No," she answered shortly.

Then her expression changed again to the winning wistfulness that had marked her when she first entered.

"Thanks again for your kindness, gentlemen," she said; then to Kemp: "If you think I'm a desperado or a spy or something awful like that, you might drop in and see me some time, constable, so I can prove to you that I'm not."

Kemp experienced an unaccountable feeling of satisfaction.

"I'll be glad to," he replied.

Mrs. Carter bade them good-by then and left the land office. The three men stood gazing after her until she disappeared down the street in the direction of the lumber yard.

"Odd, eh?" commented Robinson. "What do you suppose she's up to?"

"Beats me," said Gauthier. "She's the queerest woman I ever showed government land to. Happy as a kid with a new toy, one minute; fierce as a trapped timber wolf the next, then sad like as though she felt

like crying. I give her up. What do you think, constable?"

Kemp was gazing down the street where the mysterious homesteader had disappeared. He roused himself as though from a reverie.

"I don't know what to think either," he said.

II.

It was exactly one week later when Constable Kemp called on Alice Carter. It had been a bit of a task to keep away from her that long. To tell the truth, he was lonesome for the society of educated and cultured women of his own class, and the strange homesteader was the first woman he had seen for some time who approximated his idea of what a woman should be.

Kemp was no ordinary redcoat, even though, at the age of thirty-two, he was only a constable on small pay. Before the war he was president of a large wholesale business that he had inherited from his father, and even yet he held a controlling interest in it. As a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France he had won medals for bravery and a captain's commission. Back in Canada after the war, he found himself unable to plod along in a dull business rut again. His blood was too feverish; his mind too chaotic. His enlistment in the Royal Northwest Mounted Police was the result, and he had never regretted it.

But now, as the term of his enlistment was drawing to an end, he felt more like settling down to a less venturesome life. At last he had had enough of excitement and danger and travel. His thoughts had turned of late to a home; to a wife and kiddies, a newspaper under the reading lamp and comfortable slippers.

He had not been foolish enough to fall in love with Alice Carter at first sight, but nevertheless he was forced to admit to himself that there was something about her that attracted him. The mystery that surrounded her did not repel him; in fact, it only served to whet his interest. He had really desired to call on her the day after he met her, but he had held off for three reasons: because he did not wish to excite

comment by going to see her immediately; because he did not wish her to think he was taking advantage of his official position to force his acquaintance on her; because he feared that he might become too much interested in a woman who, after all, was a total stranger to him.

As he disembarked from his motor boat at the foot of the rocky and unbeautiful hill that occupied the bulk of Alice Carter's quarter section, he reflected that it was indeed a strange woman who would claim such a barren acreage for a homestead.

The place was totally unsuitable for agriculture. There was scarcely enough level soil for a garden, let alone a farm, and where it was not rock strewn it was timbered.

The holder did not appear to be making any effort to improve the place either. As Kemp approached her shack he saw that it was a small, cheaply-built habitation, even for a temporary summer home. It was good enough to enable her to hold the place for a few months, but that was all. She could never secure a government title with such a dwelling. The regulations called for a substantial house.

Also they called for fencing, and cropping a considerable acreage, and thus far Mrs. Carter had done nothing in that line. If she were penniless, as many homesteaders were, that would not be strange, but she was not. The high-powered motor boat which she had bought, and which was now tied up to the bank, proved that. Moneyed homesteaders invariably built a good house and started in to improve their places right away. Since she did neither, it was obvious that she did not intend to hold the place permanently; merely wished to occupy it temporarily for some purpose which might, and might not, concern the law that Kemp represented.

He hoped, as he approached her unpainted and rough-lumbered shack, that she was not a lawbreaker. He would not enjoy dragging her to a lockup. Her physical appearance indicated that she was anything but that; yet her actions were suspicious. Kemp checked this train of thought as he knocked on the door. The woman was

nothing to him; she was a complete stranger.

"Come in, Mr. Kemp; I'm glad to see you," she said. She did not welcome him in the manner of a stranger, or as she might be expected to welcome an officer of the law either. Rather, she seemed to regard him as a friend.

Kemp was not displeased that such was the case. Despite his resolution not to become too much interested in this unknown woman, he experienced a thrill as he looked at her again. He felt pity for her, too. She did not now appear to be a strong-minded female, able and ready to cope with any situation. The iron was gone from her expression. A strange wistfulness had replaced it, a hint of combined sadness and fear. She appeared less like a competent woman of large affairs, now, and more like an appealing little girl who has been frightened by the imaginary terrors that prowl in darkness.

"I hope you haven't been lonesome, living all alone in this desolate spot," he remarked.

"N-no," she replied bravely, with a glance toward her pistol which hung in a holster on the wall. "I'm all right. I suppose a change from city life to this is always a bit of a trial at first."

"A trial? I'm sorry to hear you speak in that tone. I thought you came here to enjoy yourself."

"Do people usually file on homesteads in order to enjoy themselves?" she countered.

"But you are not a homesteader—not a genuine one, I mean." Kemp went on to explain some of his reasons for entertaining this belief.

She did not contradict them, merely remarked, "You are very keen sighted, Mr. Kemp," and changed the subject.

They talked then about music and the drama and books—all the things that cultured people who live on the borders of civilization long for. And as they discussed these things Kemp found that he possessed more interests in common with this charming stranger than he had anticipated. Truly, she was one woman in a hundred. When he rose to take his departure she invited him to drop in again any time he wished.

"There is something comforting and reassuring about that red coat of yours," she said.

Kemp promised that he would, and left with two new thoughts in his mind—one that Alice Carter could not be a lawbreaker, otherwise his red coat would not be a welcome sight, the other that he was in real danger of falling in love with her if he did not keep away.

Nevertheless on the morrow Kemp was at her humble dwelling again. Alice welcomed him heartily. For a moment he fancied that her obvious pleasure when he appeared might be due to a personal interest in him that might parallel his rapidly increasing interest in her; then sober common sense came to the fore, and he concluded that company of almost any lawful kind would be welcome to a city woman who had marooned herself—for reasons unknown—in what was practically a wilderness. He tried to make some reasonable excuse for his visit.

"Do you know, Mrs. Carter, that the town is becoming interested in you," he said. "No one can figure out why a woman of your refinement and apparently high station in life should choose to file on any kind of a homestead, let alone one that is absolutely worthless. You are a puzzle; a human question mark. Folks keep asking me more and more questions regarding you. So naturally I have to drop in now and then to get the latest news regarding our mysterious homesteader."

Mrs. Carter looked chagrined. "Is that your only reason for coming to see me?" she queried.

"No," answered Kemp. He wanted to tell her that it was principally because he enjoyed her company, but prudence put a brake on his tongue. "I'm interested in the mystery myself," he added. "Some day I hope to solve it."

She evaded that topic.

"Tell me," she said, "is the news of my taking up an apparently worthless homestead likely to spread all over northern Alberta?"

The question was as surprising as everything else pertaining to her.

"Why, yes—I guess it is—over a good

part of it anyhow," Kemp answered. "That's a peculiar thing about northern Alberta. News travels by word of mouth, and if it is odd news it travels faster and faster and gets more and more strange the farther it gets from its source."

"Thanks," said Alice with a peculiar smile. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Why?" questioned Kemp. "Do you want to be talked about?"

There was just the tiniest hint of severity in his tone. It prompted increased severity in hers.

"Yes!" she said.

Kemp did not wish to exchange antagonistic remarks with her, so he spoke more gently.

"If there is anything I can do for you I'll be glad to," he suggested.

"There may be some day." Alice laughed in a manner that seemed a bit forced, and then, as on the previous day, she steered the conversation away from personal matters into the less hazardous topic of music and books.

When Kemp left he was again invited to call. He accepted the invitation. In fact, he continued to call regularly every day during the remainder of the week, and as he did so his infatuation for this strange, unknown woman grew in a manner that amazed and frightened him.

His amazement was due to the fact that never had he dreamed that love came to a man in that wild, exotic, uninvited way. He had thought that it was a slow growth, founded mainly upon a thorough knowledge of the character of its object.

He was frightened because the woman who inspired it was still as much of an unknown to him as she had been when she first entered the land office. Come to think of it, he did not even know that she was unmarried. He resolved to question her on that score.

His opportunity came on the day he was ordered downstream to bring back Calvin Hubbard, the degraded sot who was regarded with such contempt that even Justice was loath to inconvenience herself on his account. Kemp stopped off at Hopeless Homestead—as Mrs. Carter's place had been christened by the townspeople—and

during his visit he casually picked up a book that still lay open at the page she had been reading. It was a law book, and it was open at a chapter pertaining to the disappearance of husbands.

"Pardon me for becoming personal, Mrs. Carter," he said, "but would you mind telling me if you are a widow?"

With a start of surprise and an expression of embarrassment, Alice Carter noticed that Kemp had taken account of the chapter that particularly interested her. For a moment she said nothing, just gazed at him as though striving to make up her mind as to whether or not she should intrust him with some tremendous secret. She arrived at her decision in a moment, and some of the pain and worry which had lately settled upon her attractive countenance vanished.

"I am sorry to have to admit, Mr. Kemp," she replied in a tone that was both sad and wistful, "that I do not know whether I am a widow or not."

Kemp dropped the book.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Mystery piled on mystery."

He sat down in front of her. "I really am your friend," he told her. "If there's anything I can do to help you I'll be only too glad to—provided, of course, that it doesn't conflict with my duties."

For a moment Alice Carter seemed to hesitate again, then abruptly she said:

"I'll tell you my whole story."

III.

"SEVEN years ago this month I was married to a man named Calvin Carter," she began. "I was quite a young girl at the time and not so good a judge of character as I am now or I would never have done what I did. He drifted into the Nebraska town where I was born and raised, and got a job as bookkeeper in the office of the local flour mill. He was well dressed and handsome and he knew how to talk, and pretty soon half the girls in town were crazy about him. I thought it was a tremendous honor when he told me that he liked me better than any of the others.

"As I say, we were married, and then I quickly learned that my husband wasn't

quite the man I thought he was. He continued to spend his money for good clothes and cigars and so on, instead of giving it to me to keep house with. I protested, of course, and he answered by going out for a good time without me. Pretty soon he was running around with girls again, just as he had done before his marriage, except that now it was only the lowest class that would have anything to do with him. In order to get the necessities of life I secured work in a real estate office, and that made him more angry than ever.

"We lived that way for a few months, our existence a continual quarrel, then suddenly he disappeared. A town girl disappeared with him—also two thousand dollars belonging to the flour mill that he worked for.

"He was never caught and brought back. The last I heard of him he was headed toward northern Alberta. I have an idea that he is still up here somewhere—probably under another name—and that is why I came to this country and filed on this homestead."

As he listened to her Kemp was both shocked and gratified. Shocked because such a woman as Alice Carter had been forced to suffer at the hands of an unworthy man; gratified because of her frank confession of the facts. Sadness descended upon him, too, as he reflected that she must still love the man who had grossly mistreated her, otherwise she would not have come to the country where he had disappeared.

"With my husband gone there was, of course, only one thing that I could do," Alice resumed. "I continued to earn my living by working at the real estate office. Three years later an aunt died and left me a small legacy, and, inasmuch as my employer wished to retire, I bought the business and started in to build it up. It happened that a boom struck the town and I succeeded to a rather surprising extent.

"Only a few weeks ago I learned that when a husband disappears and nothing is heard of him for seven years the law takes it for granted that he is dead and his wife becomes a widow. At that time Calvin Carter had not been heard of for

six and a half years. I figured that it was up to me to do something before the seven years expired, and that is why I came to northern Alberta."

"I see," said Kemp. "You want to find your husband before he becomes legally dead. Then you must still love him, despite the shameful way he treated you."

"I do not love him," said Alice.

"Then why are you up here searching for him?"

"I am not searching for him."

Kemp repressed another exclamation of surprise.

"If you are not trying to find Calvin Carter why are you living in this country?" he questioned.

Alice Carter smiled at his air of bewilderment.

"Also what has filing on a worthless homestead got to do with tracing a worthless husband?" Kemp went on. "I'm sure I can't see the slightest connection."

"I know you can't, and that is why it seems such a shame to clear up a perfectly good mystery that has doubtless provided you and others with a whole lot of entertainment. I suppose I'll have to, though. But, before I explain, won't you make one final attempt to guess? The solution is easy enough. Let me put the puzzle in simple words: A woman comes to the homestead country to find a man, but having arrived here, she does not search for him. She only files on a homestead that is so conspicuously worthless that it causes her to be talked about. Question number one: Why does she go in search of her husband just before he becomes legally dead when she does not love him? Question number two: Why, after arriving in the country where he disappeared, does she not search for him? Question three: Why does she file on a good-for-nothing homestead?"

Kemp tried to think of the correct answers to the conundrum, but he could not do so. In fact, he was unable to think clearly. The moment that Alice began to tell her story he realized that he loved her, and with that devastating knowledge came the realization that she might still be legally tied to another man.

"I give up," he said. "I can't solve the mystery. Tell me the answers, please."

"Very well." Alice settled herself more comfortably in her chair. "In the first place, I am here, not because I want to be, but because my conscience compelled me to come. Even though I ceased to love Calvin Carter years ago, it seems only right that I should afford him every chance to return to me before the expiration of the seven years that will dissolve my marriage to him. He cannot return to my home town because he is still wanted there for the robbery of the flour mill. But he can return to me here."

Kemp was beginning to see the light.

"Then you don't really care whether you find him or not," he said. "You merely want to clear your conscience by making it easy for him to return to you if he wishes to."

"That is it exactly. That is why I do not journey from settlement to settlement looking for him. My conscience tells me that there is no necessity for me to do that. But it does tell me that I should make it easy for him to return to me. If I merely sat in a hotel he would not know I was in the country. But, because I have taken up a worthless homestead, he is likely to hear about me and then, if he wants to, he can come back to me. Do you understand now? That's why I filed on this quarter section of rock. I don't want to prove up on it. I merely want to mystify people so I'll get talked about; I want to have my name repeated. According to you, a good many people are talking about me already; my story is spreading through the whole northern territory. Very well; that suits me exactly. If Calvin Carter is still up here he will doubtless hear my name mentioned, and then, if he wants to, he can come to me."

"I see. But you really don't care whether he does or not?"

Alice Carter rose from her chair. Her eyes flashed, her soft white hands clenched.

"I do care!" she cried. "I hope to Heaven he *does not come!*" She paused to calm herself. "I sometimes think that I will die if he does," she went on. "I despise that man, I loathe him, the very

thought that he *may* come here and claim me for his wife makes my life a perfect nightmare of horror. Day and night I live in terror for fear a rap will sound on the door and he will appear—that beast, that thief! Sometimes I think that if he does I will seize that pistol hanging there on the wall and shoot him. But of course I wouldn't, I would just—oh, God only knows what I will do if he appears!" She paused for breath.

"I don't know why I am telling you all this, Mr. Kemp," she went on more calmly. "Because you said you were my friend and I believe you, I guess. God knows I need a friend. You *are* my friend, aren't you? You won't repeat all this? Of course I know you can't arrest Carter for the robbery he committed back in the United States, otherwise I would not have told you about that."

Kemp had risen when she had. Now he stood for a moment, gazing down into her sad, wistful eyes. He took her hand in his.

"Alice, dear," he said. "I am more than your friend. I love you. I want you to marry me."

She withdrew her hand and took a step backward.

"But I can't marry you," she replied. "Don't you see? I'm not free. At least, I don't know whether I am or not. I am still Calvin Carter's wife and he may appear to claim me as such at any moment."

"You can get a divorce, Alice. Any court on earth would grant you your freedom from a thief who deserted you nearly seven years ago."

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"I can, yes—but I will not," she answered. "Perhaps Calvin needs me. Maybe, if he comes to me here, I can make a new man of him. Perhaps it was partly my fault that he ran away from me with stolen funds and another woman. Maybe I nagged at him too much. Who knows? Anyway, I am not the sort of woman, Mr. Kemp, who takes marriage lightly. I took Calvin Carter for better or worse, remember."

Kemp gazed at her reverently, like a devotee at a shrine. He had wondered if

she were good enough for him. What a grim joke that was! She was a thousand times better.

"What if he should not return to you?" he queried gently.

"If, at the end of seven years, the law says that Calvin Carter is dead, then to me also he will be dead," she replied.

Kemp clasped her hands again.

"Will you marry me if he doesn't appear?" he questioned eagerly.

She did not reply; merely looked down at the floor as though striving to make up her mind.

"Please say you will," he entreated.

She looked up then with glowing eyes.

"I will," she murmured.

Kemp tried to draw her to him, but she stepped back and held up her hand to ward him off.

"No, please," she said. "I may still be a married woman, remember."

"How I hope that you are not!" Kemp regarded her in silence—for a moment. "I don't like the idea of leaving you here alone for—let's see—three and a half months longer before the seven years are up. You'll become a nervous wreck. Isn't there some way that we can find out if Carter is likely to come to you?"

"None that I can think of."

"Confound it!" exclaimed Kemp. "The chances are a hundred to one that he's dead and yet you're going to worry yourself about him for three whole months and more. He must be dead. A good-for-nothing loafer can't exist for many years in this cold climate."

It came to Kemp suddenly that there was an exception to this rule; he remembered a notorious loafer who lived down the river when he first joined the force and was still living there.

"Have you a photograph of Carter?" he asked. "Let me see it if you have, and I'll tell you if he's likely to come calling on you. I know most of the white men who have lived in northern Alberta for any length of time."

"Here it is." Alice opened a suit case, took therefrom a photograph and handed it to him.

Kemp glanced at it. At first it made no

particular impression on him, and he was minded to return the picture when it occurred to him that common politeness required him to give it more than a passing glance. He looked at it again, and as he did so a vague suspicion that he had seen that countenance before came to him. He studied it more carefully.

Suddenly Kemp caught his breath, and with difficulty smothered an exclamation of mingled amazement and horror. He did recognize it! The man he had in mind had changed greatly since the photograph was taken, but beyond the shadow of a doubt, it was his portrait that Kemp now held in his hand. The husband of Alice Carter was the drunken sot he was going downstream to arrest. The man who stood between him and the woman he loved was none other than Calvin Hubbard!

IV.

CONSTABLE PETER KEMP needed every bit of histrionic ability he possessed to keep from betraying his emotion as he continued to study the photograph of Calvin Carter, alias Calvin Hubbard. What a change had come over the man since it was taken! The picture showed a young man, handsome, debonair, clear-skinned, clean-shaven, with wavy hair. Now Hubbard, as he remembered seeing him a month previously, was wrinkled and shrunken, his face was covered with a dirty beard, his eyes were red and bleary, his lips flabby and tobacco-stained.

Kemp wondered if Alice would recognize Hubbard if she gave him merely a casual glance, without any thought that he might be her husband, and he doubted it. His own keen eyes, trained to penetrate disguises, had come within a hair's breadth of failing to perceive that Carter and Hubbard were one and the same person.

Kemp did not, at the moment, stop to consider whether he should, or should not, make Alice acquainted with the startling fact that he had discovered. Since his discovery would cause her pain, he kept the knowledge of it from her as instinctively as he would have interposed his body between her and the attack of a timber wolf. He

handed back the photograph without a word.

To his immense relief Alice replaced it in her suit case without making any comment other than, "I didn't think you would recognize it."

Kemp picked up his hat.

"Please don't worry while I'm gone," he said. "I don't think there's one chance in a hundred that your husband will show up. I'll be back again to-morrow or the day after."

"To-morrow, please—if you can," she told him.

Kemp held her hand for a few brief seconds as he bade her good-by, then he proceeded down the rocky path to where his motor boat was moored, his mind a whirling chaos of indecision. He loosed his craft, started the engine, and pointed its nose down the river toward Hay Creek. Regardless of how he would solve his personal problem, his duty was clear. He had orders to bring in Calvin Hubbard, and bring him in he would.

As his high-powered boat sped toward the derelict who stood between him and the woman he loved Kemp set himself grimly to the task of deciding whether he should bring Hubbard and Alice together or keep them apart.

An unprincipled man, he reflected, would decide immediately to keep them apart. Even to Kemp, with his strict code of honor, the temptation to do so was keen.

He pondered the different methods by which he could make it impossible for Hubbard to go to Alice. He could frighten the fellow into taking to the woods for an indefinite period, he could twist the evidence against him so he would receive a prison sentence that would keep him in jail until she left Alberta, or he could get rid of Hubbard finally and forever by adopting more desperate methods. Kemp realized, with a start, where this line of thought was leading him, and he shut it out of his mind.

In the end he decided that, regardless of consequence to himself, he would do nothing to prevent Hubbard from meeting Alice.

With that question disposed of, another and more difficult one confronted him.

Should he inform Alice that her husband was in the country? If she desired to see the man, that decision would be easy to arrive at—he would be in honor bound to tell her the truth—but since she would regard the appearance of Hubbard as a calamity beyond measure the problem was perplexing. Kemp gave it a great deal of thought, and in the end he decided that there was no reason why he should tell her unless she asked him a direct question. In that case his conscience might compel him to tell the truth or it might permit him to lie. There are occasions, he realized, when a man of honor may lie to protect the woman he loves.

Finally there was the question of whether he should tell Hubbard that his wife was in the vicinity. That was a problem entirely separate from the other problem of whether he should deliberately keep Hubbard away from her. At first it seemed easy to solve. The man deserved no consideration whatsoever. He had wronged his wife shamefully; he was a thief and a vagabond, with no more sense of honor than a coyote.

But as Kemp delved more deeply into the question of ethics involved in Hubbard's case he was not so sure that he should keep from a husband the knowledge that his wife had come to the country in order to give him a chance to make his presence known. Perhaps the man was desperately in need of a wife's help; perhaps Alice could pull him out of the abyss of degradation into which he had gradually slipped. Perhaps, as Alice herself suggested, Hubbard had not been entirely to blame for his first false step. Perhaps she *had* nagged at him. After all, the man was her husband. He could not quite make up his mind on that point.

Kemp's immediate duty was, of course, clear. Acting under orders, he would arrest Hubbard and take him up the river, past Hopeless Homestead, to the lock-up at Rodiscaw, there to stand trial for an offense that would probably draw a sentence of two or three months in jail. It was no concern of Kemp's that such a sentence would effectually keep Hubbard away from Alice for the time being.

He beached his motor boat at Hay Creek and made his way past the cabins and tepees of the Indian and half-breed residents to the small store that an independent fur trader maintained there. He inquired regarding Hubbard's present residence, and was informed that the man lived with a squaw in a certain dilapidated cabin on the outskirts of the primitive village.

The thought that it was such a despicable creature as Hubbard who kept him from the finest woman he had ever met caused Kemp to clench his strong fists in helpless rage. He noted, as he approached the man's domicile, that Hubbard had sunk below even the low level of the ignorant aborigines. He felt keen disgust as he stepped up to the door and knocked upon it.

There was no sound from within, even after Kemp knocked more loudly a second time, and the constable was almost ready to conclude that no one was at home when suddenly the door opened and an Indian woman confronted him. She started back, affrighted, as she recognized his red coat, then with the single word, "Come," she invited him to enter.

Kemp saw at a glance that the woman was alone. He looked around the dirty and disordered interior, and his contempt for the white man who shared this wretched den with a native woman became still deeper.

He looked at the woman then and was surprised to find that she was a comparatively young and not uncomely squaw. Her dress and speech indicated that she had been educated at one of the Indian mission schools. He noticed also that, while the place was in disorder at the moment, there were pictures on the walls and other evidence of an attempt to make it a decent dwelling before the task had been abandoned in disgust.

"Well?" said the woman. "You want Hubbard?"

"Yes," answered Kemp.

"For what?"

"Stealing."

A ferocious expression crept into her countenance.

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"How long in jail he get for that?"

"Two or three months probably."

"Only two, three months?"

"Yes. Why?"

The woman's tone had been repressed as though she controlled strong emotion with difficulty. Now she cast her repression aside and blazed out like a volcano.

"Because—damn him—I want him get two, three year!" She stamped her foot and shook her fist. "The dog! He get drunk; he beat me; he tear up furniture, he treat me—me that was educate in school—like I am dirt under the foot! I hate him—I hate that loafer, liar, no-good—I hope to God he get hung!" She flung out her arm to indicate the disordered cabin. "He bring me here with nice talk—say he marry me soon when he get rid of damn woman he left in States—then he tell me I am loose girl because I live with him and he will never marry me. I call him dirty dog and he raise the rough house. You see?"

"Yes, I see," said Kemp. "I am sorry. But he'll let you alone for a while now."

"You bet he let me 'lone. He don't and I stick him with knife!" She indicated with a savage gesture how she would handle Hubbard. "I hang mebbe, but what I care?"

Kemp spoke soothingly. "Tut, tut," he said. "You won't need to stick Hubbard. He'll treat you right when he gets out of jail. I'll tell him a thing or two. You leave it to me. The redcoat is your friend—see?"

"Redcoat all right—yes. But if he don't—"

She did not finish the sentence. A moccasin footstep sounded outside, the door opened, and Calvin Hubbard lurched into the cabin.

V.

HUBBARD caught sight of Kemp's red coat and stood stock still, his expression of weak viciousness frozen on his face. For a moment neither man spoke.

Kemp was studying the fellow. Yes, Hubbard was the man in the photograph; he was the legal husband of the woman he loved. The resemblance was clear enough

—but not so clear that Alice Carter would be sure to perceive it if her attention was not directed to it. What a specimen the fellow was—dirty, dressed in rags, his uncombed hair and beard making him look twenty years older than he was! Kemp regarded him with mingled pity and disgust.

"You're going up the river with me, Hubbard," he announced. "You're wanted for stealing things out of a store when the storekeeper wasn't looking—a pretty low crime for a man who once was white."

"All—all right," Hubbard acquiesced meekly. "No use trying to fight you red coats. When do we start?"

"Now."

Without paying any more attention to the Indian woman who had thrown in her lot with him than if she had been a wooden post, the husband of Alice Carter packed some of his poor belongings in a canvas bag.

"Aren't you going to say good-by to your housekeeper?" Kemp questioned sharply as Hubbard moved toward the door.

Hubbard looked at the woman who stood motionless and speechless but with unholy glee dancing in her eyes.

"That dirty squaw?" he said. "Why should I?"

Kemp gave the man a look of supreme contempt, then turned to the woman.

"You'll be able to get along all right while he's gone, won't you?" he asked.

"For sure, yes. An' if he wise, he won't come back."

Kemp told Hubbard to march then. They proceeded to his motor boat and started up stream.

A feeling of dread took gradual possession of Kemp as they approached closer and closer to Hopeless Homestead. The possibility that this poor wretch at his feet might some day stand in front of Alice Carter and be acknowledged by her as the man she had chosen for her life's mate aroused in him emotions that he had never felt before. Primitive impulses rose up from his subconscious ego and cried aloud to him to put out of his pathway this unworthy obstacle to his happiness. Strange atavistic

prompting clawed at his reason and strove to overthrow it. He looked at Hubbard, and he looked up the river in the direction of Hopeless Homestead, and, as he drew nearer and nearer to it, he muttered a silent prayer for strength to do what was right in case a crisis should develop.

After a while Alice Carter's abode came in sight. Kemp was desperately afraid that she would recognize his boat and wave to him to stop. If she did, how could he refuse? And if he did stop, how could he be sure that she would not recognize Hubbard or—more likely still—that Hubbard would not recognize her? He prayed that she would not.

Hubbard must have noticed his scrutiny of the rocky hill. He looked, too, and presently he perceived the little shack that Alice had erected thereon.

"Has some idiot gone and homesteaded that hill?" he questioned.

"Looks like it," said Kemp sharply.

"Man or woman?"

Kemp wondered if he should answer that question. It was a significant one. If he replied that it was a woman, Hubbard's curiosity would be stimulated and he would make further inquiries, either of Kemp or later on at Rodiscaw, and eventually would learn her name. If he did not, Hubbard might never think of the matter again. He must be fair to the man; must answer his question just as though he were an ordinary prisoner. He decided that he could refuse to answer without violating his code of ethics, so he said:

"It's either a man or a woman."

Hubbard subsided then. They arrived opposite the homestead, still without perceiving any sign of life thereon, and swiftly drew away from it. That crisis was past.

But another one confronted Kemp when they arrived at Rodiscaw and he took his prisoner to the barracks. Ordinarily Hubbard would be placed in the general cell along with any other minor offenders who might be awaiting trial. In that case, was it not possible, or even probable, that one of them would remark upon the foolishness of the woman who had filed upon a rocky hilltop and, in the ensuing discussion, Hubbard would learn her name? Kemp could

place him in a solitary cell if he wished to, but would that be the fair and square thing to do? Would he do it if he had no personal interest in Hubbard? No, he would not. So Kemp was forced by his conscience to put his prisoner in the general cell which was already occupied by two other men.

Hubbard was to be placed on trial in two days. At the end of the first day Kemp called on him, in the cell, ostensibly to ask if he was feeling all right, really to find out if the man had learned anything in regard to Hopeless Homestead. Apparently Hubbard had not. Nor had he, as far as Kemp could conceive, up to the time that he faced the local magistrate. The evidence against him was conclusive. He was given a sentence of three months.

Kemp was gratified because Hubbard had been put out of the way for so long a period, but still the fact remained that it was not quite long enough. When the man regained his freedom there would still remain two more weeks of Alice's self-imposed exile upon the homestead, and, with Hubbard at liberty in Rodiscaw, and the whole town discussing her strange case, Kemp could scarcely hope that Hubbard would not learn about her. There remained the possibility that the man would not recognize the fact that this particular Alice Carter was his wife, but it was a slim one. All that Kemp could do was to sit quiet and await developments.

Since he had decided down at Hay Creek that his code of honor did not require him to make Alice acquainted with the fact that her husband was alive, his conscience did not trouble him on that score. He recognized the possibility that she might ask him if he had learned anything about Carter, and, in case she did, he was still undecided as to whether he would lie to her or not.

His other problem still remained unsolved also—the question as to whether he should, or should not, tell Hubbard that his wife was in the country. He thought that if Hubbard failed to show any interest in his wife he would not feel obliged to say anything. But, on the other hand, if Hubbard did manifest a desire to mend his ways and do the right thing by Alice, Kemp feared that he would have to tell the man

all he knew. After all was said and done, Hubbard was Alice's husband.

The one thing that Kemp could do was to visit Alice often and comfort her in every way he could, and this he proceeded to do.

As week succeeded week, however, it became plain that, despite all he could do for her, the strain of daily and hourly expectancy was telling upon the woman. The possibility that, at any moment of the day or night, the man whom she loathed might rap upon her door, etched lines of care on her comely features. Kemp dared not even hint too strongly that her husband would not call on her for the time being at least. In fact he feared to say anything at all on the subject for fear he would say too much. Therefore he was compelled to endure in silent agony the spectacle of the woman he loved gradually breaking under the increasing strain of suspense.

Alice's appearance suffered in a manner that must certainly have cooled the ardor of a man who loved her less than Kemp did, and that was not all, either. As her dress became more and more untidy, so did her dwelling. She had wisely not gone to the expense of painting or installing expensive furniture, but at least it had been neat and spotlessly clean. Now it was becoming shabby. There were times when it was even unswept and undusted. One day, when Hubbard's sentence of three months was nearing its end, Alice was a particularly pathetic spectacle. She looked almost as bad as some of the ignorant slatterns who came direct from Russian and Polish villages to the free lands of Alberta. Her shack looked as though it might be housing the poorest and most unfortunate woman in the whole district.

"Only three weeks more, dear, and then the strain will be over," Kemp told her.

"Three weeks," Alice repeated agonizingly. "It seems like three years. I don't know whether I can hold out that long or not."

"Why not run in to town and stay there for a few days to relieve the strain?" Kemp proposed.

"No, no!" she vetoed. "I must be here all the time. An hour after I left might be the time he would choose to call. Not even

for half an hour can I absent myself. It's conscience, Peter. It's a terrible thing to possess a conscience, isn't it?"

"It is," agreed Kemp with great fervor.

"There are times when I almost wish he would come and relieve this awful strain," Alice went on. "There are times, too, when I feel that I am a wicked woman for not wanting him to come. Do you think it is wicked, Peter, for a woman to pray to God to keep her husband away from her?"

"Not when he mistreated her as that man mistreated you," Kemp replied.

"But *would* he have mistreated me if I had acted differently?"

"Your action in protesting when he wouldn't support you was perfectly right and proper," Kemp argued.

"Yes, yes—that's what I've been telling myself all these years—but now I'm not so sure. Maybe I *did* nag at him. Maybe I didn't make our home quite as attractive as it might have been. Maybe, instead of remaining here and waiting for him to come to me, I ought to be searching every village and settlement throughout the whole north for him. Maybe he is not in a position to come to me. Maybe—Oh, I don't know what to do, Peter!"

Kemp patted her shoulder gently. He longed to take her into his arms, but he knew only too well that she would not permit him to. One woman in a hundred? She was one woman in a million!

He reassured her as best he could and went away, proceeding slowly and thoughtfully.

All these weeks he had refused to meet the issue of whether he should tell Hubbard that his wife was in the country. He realized now that he could postpone the matter no longer. The man would be released in a few days. In less than three weeks Alice would leave the country, provided Hubbard did not appear, convinced that her husband was dead in fact as well as legally. By withholding the knowledge that her husband was alive would he not be deliberately separating a man and wife? Could he assume the responsibility for that act? Did any consideration whatsoever justify such a proceeding? Kemp's perplexity, as he made his way toward the lo-

cal prison, was as painful almost as the strain that Alice labored under.

What he decided to do, as he reached the prison, was to question Hubbard regarding his wife, to determine, if possible, whether the man wished to return to her. In case he did so desire, Kemp could see no possible course ahead of him other than that of bringing Alice and Hubbard together.

VI.

KEMP found Hubbard reclining comfortably on the cell bunk after having spent the day cutting cord wood in the barracks yard. The fellow did not seem particularly distressed at the moment. He did not appear to bear Kemp any animosity when the latter spoke to him, and the thought came to the constable that perhaps, under the surface, Hubbard was not such a bad fellow, after all, merely a weak one who might still be made over into a real man by a good woman.

"Hubbard," he began, "I'd like to learn a little of your history, if I may."

"Go ahead," said the prisoner.

"When you came to this country from the States did you leave a wife behind you?"

For a moment Hubbard hesitated, then he answered:

"Yes."

"Was she a good woman?"

Hubbard smiled sadly. "The best in the world."

"Then why did you leave her?"

For the first time in the years that Kemp had known him, Hubbard shed his air of degraded incompetence and spoke like a real man.

"Because I was a fool!" he exclaimed with surprising force. "Because I didn't realize she was one woman in a thousand. But I know it now. I knew it a whole year ago when I picked up a newspaper from our home town in Nebraska that a traveling salesman threw away in a hotel down in Edmonton and saw her name staring me in the face. A real estate business she had. Think of that! A regular business of her own, and making lots and lots of money at it, I guess.

"And that wasn't all, either. In the news column she was mentioned as being on the library board. A regular prominent citizen. And me—look at me! I'm a hell of a citizen, ain't I? Living with a dirty squaw and all—I tell you, Kemp, it makes me sick when I think of the way I could be swelling around that town with a woman like that if I only had sense enough to stay there. I'd be living in a fine house, I bet, and driving an automobile and getting my name in the paper and everything. Jiminy! Just to think of it gets my goat. Servants, too, I bet you—yes, sir, servants!"

"Have you ever thought of going back to her?" Kemp asked.

"Sure I have. I'd go crawling back on my hands and knees, I'd beg her to forgive me; I'd do anything under the sun to get square with her if I could."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because—er—well, because the way I left there wasn't quite regular. There's people there that's got it in for me."

"Wouldn't your wife be able to square you with them? If she's a rich and prominent citizen, surely she could arrange things so you could start all over again."

"I've thought of that, too, but—well, I just hadn't got around to it, constable. This worthless life I've been leading sort of gets a fellow, you know. The railroad fare would be quite a lot, too, and I'd have to have some decent clothes. But I will do it—yes, sir, I sure will! And just as quick as I can, too, because—who knows—maybe she'll get a divorce some day and go off and marry some other fellow. I thought she probably had until I saw that paper and read her name—Alice Carter. That shows she's still my wife because my name is really Carter, not Hubbard."

"So you still love her, eh?"

"A woman like that? That hasn't divorced me all these years, and can build up a big real estate business and get on library boards and everything? Well, I guess yes!" Hubbard paused to smile at some secret happy thought and then resumed: "And maybe you think she isn't a good looker. Oh, man! The best-looking kid in the whole town she was when I married

her. Only seventeen years old then, which makes her about twenty-four now, and—say—don't you suppose that a girl who was a knockout at seventeen is a better eyeful than ever at twenty-four? I'll say so." Another pause. "My God! To think of how I've wasted my years with dirty, ugly squaws—well, I'm going back to her, constable, and that's all there is to it."

Kemp did not say anything for a moment. There was only one thing he could say, and he dreaded to start. But his duty was clear now, and, however much it might hurt him, he must do it.

"Hubbard," he stated slowly and solemnly, "what would you say if I told you your wife is in northern Alberta at the present moment?"

The prisoner started violently.

"No!" he exclaimed. "What doing?"

"Making it easy to return to her."

"My stars!" Hubbard sat staring at Kemp, his mouth open, his lower lip hanging. "You're sure?" he questioned suspiciously.

"Quite."

"And she'll take me back?"

"I imagine that she will if you wish to return and will promise to do the square thing by her in the future."

"Oh, I will—you bet I will! Once a fool, but never again. No, sir! Is she far away? Can I get to her easily?"

"Yes."

"Does she know I'm locked up here?"

"No."

"Great! I don't need to tell her, do I?"

"Not if you don't wish to."

"Jiminy! And I'll be out in a few days, won't I?"

"Three days more."

"You'll tell me where she is, so I can go straight to her?"

"Better than that—I'll take you to her."

Hubbard jumped up and clasped Kemp's hand.

"You're a brick, constable," he said. "Yes, sir; you sure are. I'll remember you—you bet I will. I'll send you a nice present or something when I get cleared up back there in Nebraska and have a fine car to ride around in and everything. Yes, sir! I'll show you whether I can remember

a person that's done the square thing by me or not."

Kemp thought of the squaw that Hubbard had lived with down at Hay Creek, and he was not so sure that the man would remember him. Come to think of it, he hoped that Hubbard would not. That would only make it harder for him to forget Alice—Alice, who was the finest woman that God ever created—Alice, whom he loved better than life itself!

The realization of what he had done, and the awful consequence it would entail on himself, struck Kemp suddenly with crushing force. He rose and turned away from Hubbard to hide the wave of emotion that swept over him.

"See you again," he muttered brokenly, and quietly made his way from the cell to where he could wrestle alone with his grief.

VII.

KEMP did not call on Alice that day. He feared that he might not be able to control his emotion in her presence. But the next he had himself sufficiently well in hand to risk it, and, in the cool of the evening, he proceeded to her place.

He rebuked himself then for having neglected her the day before. Alice was in a more pitiable nervous state than ever. Lines of care were etched deeply into her face now. Her hair was unkempt, her dress was more like that of a janitress than a business woman, her shack was shabbier than he had ever observed it. Only a temporary and poorly built shack in the beginning, its lack of paint had caused some of the boards to crack and warp, and, with its newness worn off, it looked almost as dilapidated as the worst homesteader's dwelling he had ever seen. The homestead itself, now that the leaves were beginning to fall from its fringe of trees, appeared more desolate and worthless than before.

Any ending to Alice's period of agonizing suspense would be better than no ending at all, Kemp reasoned, as he climbed up the rocky path that led from the river to her poor habitation. In one way, it was a mercy that her husband was coming to her on the morrow. It seemed scarcely

possible that she could endure the strain much longer. He voiced such a thought when she admitted him, and, in a lifeless tone, invited him to take a chair.

" You are wrong; I could endure it to the end," she said. " There are only two more weeks of the seven year period left, remember. Then I'll be a free woman. And, oh Peter, you don't know how glad I will be."

Kemp had intended to tell her that next day he would bring her husband to her, but as he noted the eagerness with which she looked forward to her deliverance from the man, he could not summon up the courage to do it. No, he would put off the evil moment as long as possible. Perhaps something would yet intervene to avert it. Hubbard's heart might fail him, he might accidentally drown on his way down stream, perhaps the Indian girl at Hay Creek might stab him, as she had threatened to do.

Kemp realized that such thoughts were futile and foolish. Nevertheless, they furnished some slight excuse for what he knew only too well was his lack of moral backbone to tell her the truth. He did, however, pave the way in some slight degree for the shock he meant to inflict upon her.

" Alice," he said, " when I drop in to see you to-morrow morning I will have a companion with me. I don't want to leave him alone with the motor boat on the river bank while I come up to see you, so I'll probably bring him along with me."

" Certainly bring him," she consented. " But you'll pardon me, I'm sure, if I don't pay much attention to him. I cannot pay the proper attention to anybody or anything nowadays. You can see that for yourself. Look at me. I'm a sight. And so is the house. And the worst of it is that I don't care. While the dread of meeting that man hangs over me, nothing matters. I can't put my mind on anything—not even you, Peter dear."

" Please don't call me that," said Kemp. " It hurts too much."

He said good-by to her then, and betook himself down the rocky path from her shack to the river with a great pain tearing at him.

Conscience! What a frightful possession

it was! The satisfaction of knowing that, in bringing together two people whom the word of God decreed should not be put asunder, he had done the right thing, would be his, yes — but would that compensate him for the loss of the woman he loved?

For the first time in his life Peter Kemp began to understand why some men become criminals; why they fling aside the hampering bounds of civilization and, like wild beasts, tear and rend and kill in order to satisfy primordial desires that existed eons before the law of fang and claw was replaced by statute books.

He did not sleep well that night, but when morning came he was ready to go through with the ordeal of taking Hubbard to his wife. He went to the barracks and saw to it that Hubbard was released promptly at the designated hour, then he explained to the man that his wife's place of residence was located a short distance down stream.

" When we call on her I am not going to say one word as to who you are," he warned Hubbard. " I am simply going to take you to her place and act toward you as though you were a casual companion. The rest will be up to you and her. Is that understood?"

" Sure," rejoined Hubbard. " You won't have to do anything."

" All right," said Kemp. " Let's get it over with. My motor boat is waiting. Come along."

Hubbard had washed his face and combed his hair, but aside from that he was the same wretch that he had been when he was arrested. His eyes were not as red and bleary as they had been, but still they were bad enough. A coarse beard still hid much of his face, and the clothes were the same ill-fitting rags he had worn in jail.

They climbed into the motor boat and sped down river to Hopeless Homestead. Kemp ran the boat upon the bank and they climbed out.

" Is this where my wife is stopping?" queried Hubbard in a surprised manner as they climbed up the rocky path toward her neglected shack.

" Yes," said Kemp. " She homesteaded this piece of land."

Hubbard said nothing further, but he kept staring about as they proceeded to the shack, and then he inspected the building in rather a disapproving manner.

Alice opened the door, and in a voice that was not nearly as soft and modulated as when Kemp had first met her, bade the two of them enter.

Kemp was pained to note that her appearance had not changed for the better. Another night of little or no sleep had temporarily sapped still more of the beauty that had been hers when he first saw her, and undoubtedly would be hers again when this dreadful period of suspense was ended. Her hair was not done up, her dress hung about her like a rag. Probably because it was still early in the morning, her floor was unswept, her bed was unmade, her breakfast dishes had not been washed. She apologized briefly to Kemp for her appearance and took little or no notice of his companion.

Kemp and Hubbard sat down. Kemp did not say anything, because he expected Hubbard to announce his identity. But the latter did not immediately do so, and for a moment or two there was an awkward pause. Kemp was on pins and needles. He looked at his companion and noted that Hubbard was intently studying his wife.

Alice did not recognize Hubbard as her husband. Kemp was not entirely surprised at that, for the man certainly looked as different from the photograph that Alice had as the same man very well could look. But he did expect that Hubbard would speak to her, and as one embarrassing moment succeeded another without his doing so, Kemp's suspense became agonizing. Finally he spoke up himself.

"I was just on our way down stream," he said, "and dropped in to see if there is anything I can do for you."

"Nothing at all, thanks," said Alice in the preoccupied manner that was growing upon her of late.

There was another awkward pause.

"Since there is nothing I can do for you, I guess there isn't any particular reason for me to stay any longer, is there?"

Kemp glanced at Hubbard as he emphasized the personal pronoun. He noted

that the man was seated in the darker part of the one-windowed shack, and that Alice was paying no attention to him.

Hubbard at last seemed to grasp the hint that had been conveyed in Kemp's tone. He gulped once or twice and slowly rose to his feet. He stood looking at Alice and from her to Kemp, and, after another agonizing period of suspense, he spoke.

"I guess"—he said slowly and laboriously—"I guess—we had better be going."

He turned to the door, and in another moment Kemp found himself beside the man on the pathway outside. He did not quite know how he got there. He supposed he had said good-by to Alice in the usual way, but he could not have sworn that he had. He proceeded beside Hubbard until they reached the boat, then he turned on him.

"What's the idea, Hubbard?" he questioned sharply. "Why didn't you speak to your wife? You recognized her, didn't you?"

Hubbard smiled in his peculiarly nasty manner.

"Yes, I recognized her," he acknowledged.

"Then why didn't you tell her who you were? You said you wanted to go back to her, didn't you?"

"Sure I wanted to go back to her," Hubbard replied, "when I thought she was worth going back to; when I thought she had a business of her own, and money and position. But not now, you bet. Why, I'd be crazy to do it. Go back to a woman who looks like an emigrant, and came away up here to Alberta to file on a homestead? Did you notice how she kept her place? Unswept, down at the heel inside and out—fit for nothing but a Bohunk to live in."

"Business of her own! That's a hot joke, that is. She's got no business of her own. If she had she wouldn't be filing on a homestead. And such a homestead! I never saw a worse one. The woman must be crazy. No, you bet I didn't tell her who I was, and what's more, I won't."

"I dare say she would like to get me back. Sure! Thinks I'll try to work the rotten place, I guess, and make a living for her. Fat chance! I see myself slaving for

a red-eyed, discouraged looking woman. No, sir! I'm going back to Hay Creek, and if that woman ever comes after me I'll beat it out of there and keep on beating it till I get to where she'll never hear of me."

At first Kemp could scarcely believe his ears. He looked at Hubbard in utter amazement. Then, as he realized the utter worthlessness of this man who valued his wife only when he thought she could provide an easy living for him, fiery indignation flushed his face. His fists clenched and he took a step toward the fellow.

Then he reconsidered. This was no calamity, but a stroke of incredible good fortune. With Hubbard out of the way, Alice would consider him dead, in fact, as he would be in law, and Kemp could marry her. He smiled grimly.

"All right, Hubbard," he said. "I'll give you a lift down to Hay Creek."

Kemp took him all the way to the settlement.

"I'd advise you to keep away from Rodiscaw for the next two or three weeks," he said to Hubbard as they parted.

"I sure will" rejoined the latter.

VIII.

WHEN Alice Carter's self-imposed imprisonment on her worthless homestead expired, she abandoned the place and moved to the Rodiscaw Hotel.

She was no longer the slack and nervous person she had been when she resided in her temporary shack. Her six months of stress and strain at an end, she blossomed overnight into the beautiful and sunny-dispositioned woman she had been when Kemp first sighted her in the land office. In fact, she was even more radiant now than she had been at that time. She had feared a possible meeting with her husband then, and now that fear no longer existed. Seven years had expired since he left her, and during that time she had heard no word of him. The law therefore declared him dead, and so far as she knew, he was dead.

But Kemp was not so easy in his mind. Conscience was gnawing at him again. He could marry Alice at any time now, but did he wish to do so with a secret between

them? Could he hope for happiness if he started his married life by lying to his wife? Because, if he kept from her the knowledge that Calvin Carter was alive, would not that be virtually a lie?

He sought to draw her out on the subject one day.

"Alice," he said, "what would happen if you learned that Calvin Carter is alive?"

"I would not then be a widow," she replied. "I could not marry you."

For twenty-four hours after she made that assertion Kemp wrestled with the problem of whether he should tell her the truth. But he might as well have surrendered at the start. The principles that had guided him through life were all arrayed against him. He could never be happy with Alice if he withheld the facts from her. He could not be happy with her if he told them, either, since she would not and could not marry him, but at least he would be at peace with his conscience; he would know that in this last and greatest test of all he had again emerged triumphant. So he made up his mind to tell her, and with that idea firmly fixed in his mind, he started for her hotel.

But as he passed the barracks office he was called inside by a brother constable.

"Just received a bit of news from down river that I thought might interest you," said the latter.

The news was staggering. Kemp made his companion repeat it in detail, then he took a long walk before calling on Alice. Now he was all at sea again; he did not know whether to tell her about Calvin Carter, alias Hubbard, or not. But in the end he decided to do so.

She met him in the ladies' parlor of the town's one and only hotel. Never had she looked so beautiful, so radiant, so desirable. She was as different from the unkempt and anxious-eyed woman who had kept vigil on Hopeless Homestead as sunshine is different from fog. Her smart gown fitted her to perfection, her hair was becomingly dressed as though she had visited a metropolitan beauty parlor, her eyes were alight with happiness. Kemp looked at her for a long time before he found courage to speak.

"Alice," he said at last, "I have come to

tell you something that, I fear, will give you a painful surprise."

Alice gasped, and the old expression of dread that had disfigured her on the homestead leaped again to her eyes, blotting out their radiant expression as a snuffer extinguishes a lighted candle.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Has Calvin Carter been found?"

"Yes," said Kemp. "Calvin Carter was the man who accompanied me to your shack some two weeks ago."

She stared at Kemp. The tragedy of her attitude moved him deeply, but he felt that he had to tell his story in its regular and natural sequence.

"He went there with the intention of claiming you as his wife," he went on, "but when he saw what a poor place you had, and how careworn you looked, he decided that you would be more of a burden than a help to him, so he repudiated you and went away again."

"The wretch!" she exclaimed. "What a fool I was to think there might be some good in him after all! My first opinion of him, formed when he deserted me, was right."

"Without a doubt," Kemp agreed. "And the grim joke of it all is that the painful measure you took to let him know you were in the country—living on a worthless homestead so your name would be repeated everywhere—was the very thing that caused him to renounce you. He

thought you were what you appeared to be—a dispirited, penniless woman, driven by necessity into an attempt to make money by filing on government land—instead of the competent and well-off woman he had been led to believe you were."

"But what he thought or did makes no difference now." Alice slumped down into a chair, with her head on her arms, and sobbed. "I am not a widow, as I thought. With that man alive, I can never marry you, Peter."

Kemp sat on the arm of her chair and put his arm around her.

"That's just where you are mistaken, dear," he said. "You *can* marry me, because you *are* a widow."

"How? I don't understand." Alice looked at Peter with a mingled expression of hope and despair.

"Because I learned only this morning that Calvin Carter—or Calvin Hubbard, as he called himself here—is no longer alive. It seems that when he went back to the squaw he had been living with he abused her and boasted about the white wife he had until finally the squaw became so enraged that she did what she threatened to do the day I arrested him—she stabbed him to the heart with a knife."

It was characteristic of Alice Carter that she gave the poor wretch who had been her husband a decent burial—then, with no cloud in sight, Peter Kemp and she set out for the land where dreams come true.

(The end.)



FISHING'S FINE

ARAGGED straw and overalls,
A bamboo rod and a hook and line,
An old tomato-can of worms—

And all the joy in the world is mine.
For down the stream by the fallen tree

From the depths of the pool, a glimmer and shine
Have flashed a message and challenge to me—
Come on, old boy, the fishing's fine!

Florence B. Fink.



The Fur Cloak

By **EDGAR FRANKLIN**

Author of "A Noise in Newboro," "Regular People," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I.

MYRA CARSON is evicted from her boarding house for failure to pay rent; her next misfortune is losing a temporary job as restaurant cashier in a hotel. As she passes through the lobby she meets a strange girl, who asks her, as a great favor, to change hats and coats for a short time. Impetuously she slips into the fur cloak. Within the next few minutes she is seen by the hotel manager, her roommate, Daisy Walsh, and her fiancé, Arthur Bond, all of whom conclude that Myra is indebted to some generous man for the costly garment. She is furious. As she rushes from the hotel she is approached by a chauffeur, who directs her to a limousine around the corner; thinking it belongs to the real owner of the coat she accompanies him. They drive through strange streets, and to a sparsely settled neighborhood; she is ordered out of the car—and discovers that she has been kidnaped.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE SIDE ROOM.

THERE was, of course, the ancient and ineradicable impulse to scream. Myra, fairly convinced that something of a most unusual and threatening nature was afoot, essayed to scream to the very limit of her lung power. A great palm,

suddenly placed over her mouth, reduced this sound to a mere gasping grunt, inaudible twenty feet away. Again she struggled viciously, putting forth all the force of her strong young body. The big arms merely tightened a little about her and Miss Carson was carried on and on, toward the house.

Hazily she caught soft steps on bare floor

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within and the creaking of a hinge; in the blackness a dim square of light appeared, the small, lean figure of a man in the center. Then Miss Carson had entered the house, willy-nilly, and the door had closed after them. She felt herself swung to the floor. She saw the footman turn the key, and grin at her. The larger chauffeur held her, rather gently, too, by either shoulder and addressed his words directly into her face.

"Chop off that screech, sister—cut it out!" he advised angrily. "You wanter get this and get it right: you keep your face shut and do what you're told, and there ain't a thing going to happen to you! Get that?"

"Open that door and—and let me out of here!" Myra panted.

"Don't be funny, kid. D'ye get me? Then get this, too: start hollerin', start anything rough and—well, it could be your papa and mamma and your friends wouldn't ever see you again. Y'know what I mean? I don't want t' hurt you. These two guys don't want t' hurt you. But at that, if it lies between lettin' you get us into trouble and chokin' the breath out o' you, the bettin's all one way."

There was something very convincing about this man when one came to know him better.

Myra Carson, who had been about to scream for help in good earnest, reconsidered and held her peace, merely staring up at him with eyes which, despite her best efforts, were growing more frightened every moment. A grudging and rather awful smile flickered about his lips.

"You look like a reasonable kid; you look like you understood. You don't have t' be told we're—well, we're three pretty bad guys and it wouldn't be no more trouble t' croak you than nothin'. And, at that, you wouldn't be the first one we croaked!" he stated with entire calm.

Myra could not still the shiver. It came into being without consulting her at all. It shook her quite visibly. She looked around in plain, well-warranted terror—at the chauffeur who, she fancied, must have committed at least two dozen peculiarly horrible murders—at the footman, who was

a rather stupid and negative sort of person, extremely muscular and doubtless a mere handy man—at the third of her captors, lean and very dark and plainly more intelligent than either of the others. He looked like the brains of the gang!

"What are you—going to do with me now?" she asked him, suddenly and pointedly.

The dark man showed his teeth for one smiling, approving instant as he gazed at Myra.

"If you don't make trouble we do nothing," he replied. "We just keep you here a little while."

"Why?"

"That would be telling too much—yes?"

"But when—when you've kept me here a little while?" Myra persisted.

"Ah, then we gotter see!" explained the dark one, who seemed simply overflowing with illuminative information.

They were still in the hallway of the wretched house. A mere oil lamp, hanging overhead, denoted their tremendous distance from any real civilization. In there, in what must have been the living room, since it was furnished with a table and several chairs and a fragment of rug, another oil lamp burned. Just behind Myra a second door stood open, blackness beyond it; and the chauffeur nodded to the footman, indicating this open door, and the footman hurried in, and Myra heard the scratching of matches. A sad little oil lamp presently flickered to life under the footman's fingers.

"Well, anyway, we got the kid—we should worry about what happens next," said the chauffeur quite jovially. "In this way, girly!"

He indicated the second room, which consisted of a dubious cot, a shaky chair, the oil lamp and an extremely musty smell. Myra drew back. And at once, having been lifted bodily, Myra moved into the room, and the chauffeur stood her on her feet once more.

"One thing, kid, you gotter learn to mind better when you're spoken to," he informed her rather gravely. "Next time you're gonna walk or you're gonna get the flat o' that alongside your jaw!" he added discourte-

ously, exhibiting his vast palm. "Now, about this room. Don't get excited about that window. Them shutters outside is solid and they're locked with a iron bar *that* thick! You couldn't go through 'em with a sledge and you got no sledge."

Myra found nothing appropriate to say.

"So take a tip from a friend and just sit tight and mebbe you'll get out of it all right," he concluded. "Roll over on the cot and pull the billion-dollar coat over you and sleep, if you want to. And get this and don't let it slip yer mind for one second, kid; if you wanter die sudden and unpleasant, start something around here!"

A certain crude dramatic instinct evidently lurked in this individual. He waited for no comments from Myra Carson. He came to the end of his speech and, for just one second, blistered her with a glare of such concentrated villainy as must have penetrated her very soul. Then, with a slam, the door closed after him and Myra heard the key turn scratchily on the far side.

And she was alone and privileged to think.

This, for the first few minutes, was a wholly impossible undertaking. The thing which had been Miss Carson's good, reliable brain whizzed and whirred and whirled, but flatly declined to produce one definite idea. After that, the utter stillness oozing into her, the whizzing ceased, giving place to something almost less desirable—swift, coherent thought!

She had been trapped. Or rather she, as Myra Carson, had not been trapped deliberately, but the wearer of this exquisite coat most certainly had been trapped! And what a very, very wise young person the original wearer had been! Evidently aware that she was about to be kidnaped, she had bestowed her external self upon Myra Carson—and that simple soul had accepted it and—and now she was *here!*

As for the rest of it? Myra fluttered down to the shaky chair and shook her head. Why had it happened at all? She did not know. How had a gang of criminals possessed themselves of that expensive car? Decidedly, they did not look like the sort of criminals who operate with much capital. But Myra did not know. And what was

to be the end of it, what was to be her own fate? That was a matter of the most acute personal interest—yet Myra had no more information upon it than upon any of the other counts.

It were as well, perhaps, not to delve too deeply into her further meditations as she sat on the shaky chair. They strayed to the dear family at home, long since abed and sleeping, all unaware of the eldest daughter's dire peril. They strayed to Arthur Bond, whom Myra loathed so completely and whom she would have given the wealth of the world to see at that moment. They strayed to Daisy Walsh.

And somehow—it may possibly have been Daisy's queer advice, but was more probably the memory of that last interview with Daisy—Myra Carson began to warm through again at this point and her genuine anger began to rise. Miles beyond the status of a mere outrage, it was incredible that a thing like this could happen to any one in a great center of population! It was even more incredible that she, the self-confident, absolutely self-reliant Myra Carson, having permitted it to happen to herself, should be sitting here, trembling and helpless, and framing not so much as one constructive thought that looked toward escape.

Because, since nothing in the world is impossible, this was by no means impossible to a person of resource and determination. Particularly to a person who did not seek to cloy all creation with the sweetness of her smile—and there was not a solitary smile left in Myra Carson! She straightened up and listened. There was a hum of voices coming from the room across the hall. Very softly she arose and tiptoed to the window.

The shutters were there, fast enough; in the little chink between them she could even discern what looked like a very thick iron bar. So that settled the possibility of escape by the window and left just the door, of course. How does one pass through a locked door guarded by three adult thugs not ten feet distant, without attracting attention? On the face of it, one merely does not. On the other hand, it is the person who permits himself to be stopped by every

surface obstacle who passes his whole life on the same spot.

Miss Carson tiptoed to the door. Perhaps with a little better information as to the thickness and construction of that door, she could have hurled her strong young body straight through and accomplished a dash to the outer world before they could have caught her. Frowning, she looked it over and—why, she could distinguish what the low voices were saying! Myra grew quite tense and listened.

That was the little dark man.

" . . . hand it to you, anyway, Joe. You're a dumb-bell, but you got away with this fine!"

He laughed softly and as if much pleased. The chauffeur also laughed, more noisily.

" I don't have to wear no crape for my brains, old-timer!" he stated with becoming modesty.

" The two that were on the car? Did you have to muss 'em up much?" the small man inquired further.

" Why, they ain't even cut!" announced the chauffeur. " That part was a pipe, I'm telling you. Anybody falls for a shot o' hooch these days, even guys that never took a drink before. This, now, pair o' swell guys was sitting up front, waitin' for the doll and pretty near froze t' death when we came up. Nick, here, asked 'em could he beg a light, and we got into conversation with 'em that way. Not such bad guys at that. Easy t' talk to; that's what I was scared of most at the start."

Myra grew even more attentive; recent history seemed to be unfolding before her very ears, as it were.

" There was no call t' be scared of 'em," her driver pursued. " Around five minutes and we was all like brothers. Pretty soon, how about a little drink, I says. It costs nothing and we know where it lives, I says. First off, they couldn't see it. I mean, the big guy that was driving looked sad and shook his head and the footman bird come out and says they'd die for one drink, but they dassent leave the car. Well, around that time the wind started t' blow like it was comin' straight from the North Pole," the chauffeur chuckled. " The footman fell first and the chauffeur didn't take a lot more

teasin'. So around the corner we takes 'em, and to the empty house you picked out, and Nick 'd got the basement door open before we started, so in we goes. I soaked the big guy and Nick soaked the little feller, and they went out like they'd been breathin' ether for a month."

" They're well tied?" the small man asked anxiously.

" I'll say they're tied! They were tied tight two minutes after me'n Nick 'd got their coats and hats, bo. We got their mouths all stuffed nice, too," said the chauffeur with a touch of pride. " If them guys work loose short o' two days I'll eat my—say, what ha' you got to eat here?"

" Sandwiches—pot of coffee in there on the stove. Never mind that now. Tell me the rest of it."

" There ain't any rest! We went back and drove around t' the side where it's dark, and left word with the carriage man, and then the jane come out and hopped in without even lookin' at us. That's what y' git for being one o' these proud young billionairesses, too damn good to look at a guy that's drivin' her car!" the chauffeur reflected. " If she'd 'a' lamped us careful, we'd never 'a' started. I don't look no more like the guy that was drivin' that car than you look like Jack Dempsey. Hah!" concluded the chauffeur with a yawn. " What kind o' sandwiches y' got?"

The girl winced. She had been hungry, had she not? For that matter, she was still hungry, but she wanted to hear more. She was obliged, by the dark man, who quite ignored the food question in:

" Made it absolutely clean, eh?"

" Absolutely, kid!"

" It looks pretty good! I'll say it looks pretty good."

" It does till daylight, when some motorcycle bull comes along and lamps that car standing out front."

" You'll have to take that and lose it, as soon as you've eaten," the dark one said briskly. " Might not be a bad idea to run it into the river, Joe. Yes, do that if you can. Take along your own coat and hat and leave this stuff on the dock. That 'll look as if you went in after it and never came up."

There was a little pause, during which Miss Carson drew breath with extreme care. The tenor of the dark gentleman came softly, in a blithe and meditative little song, and Myra breathed again, less carefully. Much, it seemed to her, had been explained, but not nearly enough. If they'd just keep on talking as loudly as that for a little longer, though—

"About the doll in there," said the voice of Nick, the late footman.

"What?" barked the dark man, his song breaking suddenly.

"Feller, that's some grand lookin' little chicken!" the gentleman pursued, too appreciatively. "I seen 'em good, but this one—"

"I thought that was the way your mind was running!" the dark one said with growing anger and with a new, sharp note in his voice. "You want to lay off that stuff. Get me? Lay off it and lay off it quick! None o' that!"

"None o' what?"

"This kid ain't to be injured in any way, shape, form or manner!" the leader of the interesting little band announced explosively. "That's orders and *his* orders, and it goes!"

"Well, sure, but—"

"There ain't any 'buts,' Nick," replied the dark man, and his voice softened in a queer, indefinitely dangerous way. "Not about this! That part of it he gimme straighter'n any other part: she ain't to be hurt!"

"Well, y' might think—" Nick essayed again in a whine.

"I ain't thinking. I know you. And I know *him*, even if I ain't known him long. We can throw a scare into her if we have to, but there ain't to be a bruise on her! There ain't to be a scratch on her! There ain't to be one hair of her torn out! Get it? I did, the way he put it!" The dark one laughed very shortly. "Once anything like that was pulled, he said, it starts the whole gang of us doing a stretch! And he's the boy that can work that from the inside, without ever getting the tip of one of his own fingers mixed up in the mess, I'm telling you!"

This statement he concluded with an em-

phatic thump on the table. The chauffeur began rather heavily:

"Well, at that—when a guy like that goes nuts and starts stuff like this—he could get in bad, too, if we—"

"Joey, any time you start putting *that* guy in bad, you want to kiss your friends good-by first, because you'll be riding north in a smoking car and you won't see 'em again for some time! Nah! I'd cut off a leg before I'd start double-crossin' that there bird, and it wouldn't hurt so bad, neither."

"Well, don't get hot. Nobody—" Nick tried to say.

"His money's good and he hands it out free! You're getting yours, but *I'm* running this show!" concluded the dark gentleman savagely. "Not either of you—*me*! And the first one of you that starts anything with that kid—"

"All right! All right!" Nick interrupted quite disgustedly. "We gotcher, feller! Let it go at that!"

Followed another pause, during which Myra Carson's brain functioned once more with remarkable speed.

Information of tremendous interest had filtered through the door these last two minutes! There seemed to be a potent "guy" behind all this—a person who, whatever his other intentions, had laid down flatly the law that she was not to be injured. More, it was a law apparently to be enforced to the letter and—Miss Carson stifled a small, wild little laugh.

Not ten minutes ago she had been visited by the flitting impulse to summon them and produce again the old and unreliable smile, perchance thereafter to wheedle her way to freedom. Just now it appeared that if ever in her life a time was to come when sheer unpleasantness promised reward, this was the time! Nor would this involve either effort or acting; Myra Carson's ancestors had fought in all the wars back to the Revolution. She was very purely a freeborn American citizen; the temper of one of this breed is rarely sweetened by the kidnaping of his person.

So Miss Carson, setting her fine little teeth, pondered the matter for some thirty seconds, while out in the larger room the

chauffeur person yawned and even again inquired:

"Where's them sandwiches?"

"Out in the kitchen in a paper bag. Wait a while, Joe; you ain't starving. I want to—"

Miss Carson, gloved fist doubled, pounded hard and repeatedly upon the door. Beyond, the sentence broke in two and there was a momentary scuffing of feet. She could all but feel six eyes turned in her direction!

"Hey, that's too much noise!" the chauffeur remarked in an undertone. "We don't want no riot here."

"Oh, let her alone!" the dark one advised with a chuckle. "She's just getting some of it out of her system. She'll lay off that stuff in a minute if we don't pay any attention."

"Well, I better go see what she—" Nick began.

"You sit down there or I'll knock your damned block off!" the head of the company advised him.

After this there was expectant silence. They were apparently listening for the next manifestation, or possibly they were assuming that there would be none. If so, Miss Carson mused, they could not have been more utterly wrong. But her small fist was inadequate and unconvincing; she looked around for something more substantial. In the class of hard, portable objects there was only the shaky wooden chair.

She stepped lightly over to it and lifted it. It was of just the nicest weight and balance for throwing! Some ten feet from the door Myra took careful aim and swung her chair and—threw it!

And there was a splintering crash that suggested a maddened whippet-tank passing through the side wall of the shack. Legs, rungs and a ruined back sprayed out like fireworks, clattered gayly to the floor and rolled around. The heavy wooden seat, delaying its descent for the well-judged fraction of one second, landed with a loud and highly individual thud.

Then, for a little, a tomblike hush brooded over the establishment, while Miss Carson considered the cot. That article, with

apparently removable side rails of heavy iron, would come next.

CHAPTER VI.

THE INTRACTABLE ONE.

IN the far room, feet scuffed again suddenly, suggesting three gentlemen in the act of rising.

"What the—" Nick began.

"What'd she do that time?" the chauffeur choked blankly.

"She must 'a' kicked out the wall, from the sound of it!" the dark one snapped. "What can be wrong with that doll, anyway?"

"Open this door!" screamed Miss Carson.

"Hey! One more like that an' some watchman over on Long Island 'll hear her an' telephone the police!" cried the footman nervously. "Lemme go in and—"

"I'll go myself!" said the dark one.

"Now, listen!" the chauffeur cried huskily. "Let me do this. This Jane's gotter get quieted and I'm the boy that can do it!"

"Only remember—"

"Sure, I understand—I understand! I—"

"Open—this—door!" Myra shrieked again, much more violently.

Heavy steps thumped promptly toward her. They stopped just beyond the portal.

"Hey, cut that out! What's the idea o' that noise?" thundered the chauffeur, his tone greatly like that of an annoyed bull.

"You open this door or I'll break it down!" the girl shrieked.

"Open it! Open it, y' bonehead! She might hurt herself!" escaped the dark man in a feverish hiss.

"If she don't hurt herself I'll hurt her good and proper!" roared the great brute as he turned the key and threw open the door. "There! Yer door's open! Wotter y' think it's going to get you?" he demanded directly of Myra's face.

Logically, the young woman should have shrunk away from him; she failed to shrink; and noting this with visible astonishment the chauffeur stared for an instant and then grew much more brutal.

"Lissen, kid!" croaked he. "Y' dunno what you're up against here and you're makin' a big mistake. That's what I come in t' tell you—see? You shut your trap and sit tight, and you might get out o' this all right. But when you start throwing fits you're gettin' so close to a funeral you can pretty near smell the flowers!" he pursued terribly. "Y' see them hands, kid? They could take you and bust you in a million pieces so quick that—"

"I'm not interested in your hands; they're filthy! Let me pass!"

"Pass nothin'!" the large man gasped: "You beat it back there or—"

"You let me pass or I'll scream until they can hear me on the other side of the Hudson River!" said the gentle captive.

A really appreciative grin had come to the features of the dark little man.

"Let her pass, Joe!" he ordered quietly, and examined Myra with considerable new interest as she crossed the hall at a cool saunter and entered the living room. She looked the dark man up and down.

"I suppose I'm to thank you," she said. "I do. Now open that outer door and tell that hulk to drive me back to the Aldean Hotel and nowhere else."

Thereupon she waited, inwardly tense, almost convinced that she would be obeyed. In this, however, she erred. The dark man looked puzzled, although he still smiled.

"You better stand by that outside door, Nick," he said reflectively. "I guess this lady ain't anybody y' take a chance on."

"Are you going to do it?" Miss Carson asked.

"No, lady, we couldn't do all that," the dark one smiled. "We'd like to please you, but we couldn't do that."

Myra eyed him steadily and with an evil smile.

"For the last time," she said quietly, "will you do as I have said, or shall I begin to make more noise than—"

"Now, listen, lady," the dark man said, as quietly, although there was a keenly anxious note in his voice. "I know how you feel, but you wanter be reasonable. We've got you, you know; there's no gettin' around that, is there? You're here and there ain't another house in two blocks. So if you

just want to be reasonable, Miss Ramsey, and—and let me explain—"

Despite herself, Miss Carson knew that she had started. So her name was Ramsey now? There was bound to be some sort of aftermath to all this; a little pause just here, so that it yielded information, might not be wasted.

The chauffeur person was growing concerned, too.

"Sure. That's the stuff!" he said. "Let's be reasonable. Have a chair, lady? Have a—have a sandwich?"

This time Myra winced, albeit she felt constrained to sneer at him.

"Possibly, if you don't handle it—"

"Get them sandwiches, Joe," the dark man ordered swiftly. "Leave 'em tied up in the paper—and bring in that coffee and a clean cup and the condensed milk. Now. Just sit there, Miss Ramsey. That's a pretty comfortable chair."

The captive complied. In the adjoining kitchen there was much hurried thumping about. Joseph, the chauffeur, reappeared and placed beside her a rather greasy package of prodigious size—and still, from that package floated odors so rare, so enticing that Miss Carson's dainty fingers shook a little as she opened it.

The dark person watched her intently as she took the first bite. She was quiescent for a little, and more than this, apparently, he did not ask.

"Now, I just wanter tell you something about all this, Miss Ramsey," he said very gently and very earnestly. "You don't wanter blame us fellers too much; times are pretty hard and we have to pick up a little change whenever we can, y'know. I guess you don't understand why you're here?"

"I do not," said Miss Carson, and selected another sandwich.

"Well, no more do we," the other pursued helpfully, "only we were told to bring you here. On the level, I couldn't tell you a thing more about that part of it if you was to offer me a million dollars. Point is, we did bring you and we don't want any trouble and you don't want any trouble and everything's going to be nice and pleasant if you'll just do your part."

"My part, I presume, being to say that it's just lovely to be kidnaped and that I like it and can't possibly get too much of it," Myra sneered.

"If—if you want to put it that way."

"I don't. And I don't see it that way," the amazingly calm captive pursued as she examined the pile further and reflected that, beyond question, the champion sandwich maker of the whole world must hold forth somewhere near this spot. "Go on, please."

"There ain't so much more that I can say, Miss Ramsey. Only you're a good, common sense girl. You hafta admit you can't do a thing. We're three grown men and you're just a kid and a girl. So what you wanter do is just get back in your room, and if there's anything you want that we can get, you'll have it."

"And then?"

"And then, maybe to-morrow, maybe the day after—I couldn't just say about that part—we'll take you and leave you near a subway station somewhere and you can go back to your friends and laugh about it."

"You think I'll do that, do you?"

"Why, sure you will, Miss Ramsey. You ain't going to get hurt if you act right. You're going to look back and think this was all a joke!"

"Really?" Miss Carson said crisply. "I'm sorry, but I don't agree with you about that, either. In the first place—"

The chauffeur—and this may have been because his whole attention had been upon the dwindling pile of sandwiches—stirred suddenly and waved a large hand at his commander.

"Wait a second, chief—wait!" said he. "Y' got the dope all wrong. This Jane's handing you the high josh an' you're fallin' for it. The kid's got too much nerve—she dunno what she's up against here. Listen to me, kid!" he commanded again, with gathering force and a lowering brow. "Maybe this might be a joke to you later, but it ain't no joke now, take it from me. You pull a couple more o' them highbrow sneers an' one of us fellers is likely t' get peevish and hand you a coupla good ones an' learn you yer manners. Wise t' that, ain't you? An' if one o' them hands ever hit you—"

"Oh, shut up!" the dark man snapped angrily. "That's no way to talk to Miss Ramsey. She's just a nice lady and—"

"She's what?" Myra demanded.

"Sure y're, and—"

"You're wrong again! There's nothing whatever pleasant about me, my man. In fact, if you'd hunted carefully through the whole six million people in this town you couldn't possibly have kidnaped a more thoroughly unpleasant person than I am."

"Eh?"

"And another thing—which is what I tried to say a few minutes ago—I don't admit for an instant that I'm as helpless as you fancy. There are so many things that an intelligent person like myself can do."

"I wouldn't try any of 'em."

"No? Why not?"

"Because it could be that you wouldn't get out o' here alive," the dark person said, and grew threatening on his own account. "And admitting you could work it, we'd get back at you, kid. This ain't a bunch that lets a little skirt like you walk on 'em!"

"Get back?"

The dark one bared his teeth in an awful leer and dropped his voice to a blood-curdling croak that was really overdone.

"How'd it be some mornin' if you found your papa with a knife stuck in his back?" he queried.

Miss Carson merely raised her brows and shrugged.

"It would be most awfully painful and inconvenient for him, I fancy, but what happens to Mr. Ramsey is a matter of absolutely no concern to me!" she stated strangely, yet with perfect truth. "What he will do to you may be interesting, I should think, but that's all apart for the moment. I think we'd better stick to the main question: what *I* can do. For a beginning, I can scream remarkably. You really haven't heard me scream yet."

"Kid, before you start any screaming—" the head of the band began, and his color rose suddenly and died out more suddenly.

"Oh, but there isn't any 'before,' you know," smiled Miss Carson, and set down her coffee cup, the contents of which had been quite as excellent as that of the life-saving sandwiches. "I'm starting now!"

She threw back her pretty head; she opened her pretty mouth widely.

"Help!" screamed Miss Carson; and again: "Help!" And if the rafters had rung with the first two words, they fairly swayed in her third: "Help!"

The chauffeur's hand, clean or otherwise, closed over her mouth. The chauffeur was breathing hard, too; the dark man seemed more than a little perturbed. Eyes dilating, every muscle tense, he listened, second after second; then:

"Hear anybody coming, Nick?" he asked thickly.

"If there ain't, they're all dead within a mile!" the footman snapped.

"Open the door and listen! Make it snappy!"

The key rasped; the outer door, invisible to Miss Carson, creaked open—and there was another breathless little pause.

"Well, at that, I guess it got by that time," the footman reported, very relievedly, as the latch clicked again. "There ain't a sound of anybody out there."

"Take another stab at that, an' I'll knock you so cold you won't come around again inside of a week, y' little rat!" the slightly pallid chauffeur puffed charmingly, and relaxed his grip; and then he lowered his voice to a rumble that should have terrified even a strong man: "That's on the level, kid! Too much is *enough*—get that!"

Again he extended his great palm significantly—it seemed to be a pet gesture of his—but Miss Carson merely smiled up at him.

This last minute or so she had gained very pleasant confirmation of recent words which, coming so faintly through the door, might well have been misunderstood, and that to her considerable detriment. Even in the recent feverish moments when a little roughness might have been expected in spite of everything the chauffeur's hands had never really gripped her forcefully enough to bruise; he had, indeed, restrained her with remarkable gentleness.

Nor, whatever the savage inclination in his eye, was the little dark man moving toward her even now. Orders very evidently were orders, whoever had issued them; the trio were bound hard and fast to the propo-

sition of treating the physical part of her with the utmost consideration.

So Miss Carson straightened her forty dollars' worth of hat and smiled at the dark man, too.

"I can scream?" she asked archly.

"I'll tell the whole world you can scream!" the person answered quickly, pleadingly almost. "Only can it, lady! Can it and—".

"You mean, stop with that one little scream?"

"Yes!"

"Couldn't think of it," said Myra, and expanded her chest. "That one didn't bring help, and I can do ever so much better, anyway. I really am trying to bring help, you know," she explained. "I wasn't doing it just to be playful. So—"

Her lips parted. The dark man darted at her.

"Wait, lady! Wait!" he cried. "Once is enough for that! Don't try it again—please don't! Joe 'll only have to choke you off and—and—lady, won't you please sit down and let's talk sensibly?"

"About letting me out of here?"

"No. We can't let you out or—"

"Well, that's the only topic I care to discuss, sensibly or otherwise," Miss Carson said, and remained standing.

The pair were gazing at one another, worry and perplexity in their eyes. Very apparently she was not behaving as a young woman should have behaved under the circumstances—which was well, but which tended in no way to extricate her from the mess. Miss Carson, frowning, was visited by inspiration.

"Mr.—er—Ramsey—father, that is," she began.

"What?" barked the dark man.

"You're holding me for ransom, of course?"

"No!"

"Really?" said Miss Carson, and opened her eyes. "Will you tell me just why you are holding me, then?"

"No," the dark man said briefly.

"Put it in another way: if sufficient ransom were paid you, whatever the circumstances, you'd release me?"

The dark man eyed her thoughtfully.

"It'd have to be a mighty fat wad, kid!" he mused.

"Ah, but my father has many, many of those fat wads, as you call them," Miss Carson said sweetly. "Ten thousand dollars—would that interest you?"

Emotion sent a shudder through the chauffeur; even the dark man was visibly affected.

"How—how'd this be worked, lady?" he asked.

"Drive me to a down town subway station now, and I give you my word as a Ramsey that you shall have the money by this time to-morrow—no questions asked and no arrests—and you may make your own arrangements about receiving the cash."

She waited. For once in a way, it seemed, she had a really bright idea. But the chauffeur was sighing regretfully and the little dark man, shaking off the spell, also shook his head.

"Nothing to it, lady," he said. "Oh, you'd probably go through with your part of it, kid—you look like sport enough for that. But when you told your papa about it—oh, no, we couldn't take a chance like that. Say, you better get back in your room now!"

"That means that you refuse absolutely to release me?"

"It certainly does."

"Very well. Then I'll have to take other measures," Myra said briefly.

"There ain't any other measures you could—" the chauffeur began.

"Oh, but there are—dozens of them. You're not a bit imaginative, are you? I don't like your company; if you refuse to release me I'll release myself!"

"How?"

"By killing myself, of course!" Miss Carson said.

"Hey!" cried the chauffeur.

"Now, that'll be all o' that!" the dark man stated, energetically. "That wild stuff won't get you anything. You ain't going to get let do anything like that when—"

"Let? Let?" shrieked Miss Carson, and brought her voice to a pitch that was thrilling if not actually blood-freezing. "You've

nothing to say about it, of course. I shall simply fight you—all of you!—until one of you kills me or I drop dead of exhaustion!"

She laughed horribly. She threw off her cloak and tossed her little hat atop it. She laughed again, more horribly, and swung her strong young arms and backed away a little—and just there the chauffeur, who was breathing very heavily, recaptured her and held her fast.

"She means it! She'll start something! The woman's a nut!" he stated.

"You let me go! Let me go, do you hear?" Myra screamed, and struggled violently. "Let me go or—"

"Hold her easy! Hold her easy! You're going to bruise her that way!" the dark man cried very sharply, indeed.

"Sure! Hold her easy! What d'ye think she is?" the chauffeur panted savagely. "This damn little brat's stronger'n a leopard! How the—"

"Cut out the swearing!" the leader snapped. "Hold her gentle and—"

"Yeh! Hold her—hold her!" Joseph thundered and threw his head far back, thus avoiding Myra's swift, clawing hand. "How long am I supposed to hold her? All night like this?"

Still, a rather badly judged twist of Myra's just then had delivered her to him. His giant arms wound about her, crushing her shoulder-blades to his brawny chest, which heaved astonishingly. Miss Carson, for the moment subdued, improved that moment by examining the leader, the while she wheezed alarmingly and curled back her lips, as if about to bite the arms away from her.

And if the chauffeur Joseph was a little perturbed, the dark man seemed downright upset by her behavior. His face had twisted into a scowl, wherein hot anger mingled with something strongly resembling terror. On his dark brow perspiration glistened.

"Lady, how long y' figuring t' keep up this circus?" he asked pointedly.

"Till I die!" Myra snapped.

"Yeh, and I guess that'll be about all o' that!" the leader said conclusively. "I didn't sign on for anything like this. I was told you was a—a tender little thing that'd scare easy."

"Somebody lied to you, didn't they?" Myra laughed, and wrenched again.

"I'll say they did! I'll—listen, Miss Ramsey. Supposing there was a chance of your getting out of this, would you call off the show for about fifteen minutes?"

"How good is the chance?"

"It's elegant!" the leader replied with deep feeling. "I dunno how it'll be worked yet, but us and you's going to part company between now and morning—you take that from me! I'll run risks, but I'll run no risk o' bumping anybody off like this! Will y' do that?"

"U-m—yes!"

"You'll lay off all the rough stuff, absolutely?"

"Yes."

"Let her go, Joe!" the leader snapped. "Where's there a telephone?"

"For what?" the chauffeur asked, releasing Myra.

"I gotter talk t' *him* quick!" the dark man replied with surpassing bitterness. "There's things I want to say and—where's the nearest phone?"

"Back the car around an' go t' the avenue and then south around ten or twelve blocks. There's an all-night drug store there."

"And leave it outside with every bell in the world looking for that license number by this time!" muttered the leader; and then, his eye meeting Myra's very bright and determined ones, he shrugged. "It's worth taking the chance at that," he stated, and snatched up his cap.

The outer door slammed behind him and was locked again. Outside they heard the motor starting and then the whir of gears as the car backed about; and this turned to the whine of higher gears—and died out in the distance.

Miss Carson straightened her rather ruffled toilet and looked about meditatively. She had accomplished something through her latest fit of unpleasantness. Just what? The implanting of fear into the tremulous bosom of Joseph, anyway. He was looking at her now much as a timid keeper might regard an uncertain lioness.

"Woncher—woncher sit down, kid?" he asked with an ingratiating smile.

"I don't care to sit down."

"Gwan—sit down!" Joseph urged, quite pathetically, obviously possessed of the idea that she would be a trifle less dangerous sitting. "Sit down and—have a sandwich! Go ahead; have a couple sandwiches!" entreated Joseph as her eye brightened promisingly. And in his own eye a light of forced but willing renunciation kindled. "Sure—on the level! I don't want none!" said he, waving a hand in their direction. "Have 'em all!"

CHAPTER VII.

BEING DISPOSED OF.

JOSEPH himself, smiling apologetically, his manner suggesting the certainty that she would not misconstrue the move, drew his own chair nearer and perched on the edge.

"Gwan, kid! Have a—"

"I don't care for any more, thanks."

"Well—all right," said Joseph, and sighed lightly. "We'll just sit here'n talk, then."

"I don't know that I care to talk to you, either."

She faced him thoughtfully and Joseph grew a trifle more tense.

"All right," said he. "Only don't get t' frettin', kid. They ain't nothin' to fret about. He'll have you all fixed up fine soon as he comes back."

"Oh, I'm not fretting, I assure you," said Myra.

Followed a curious little lull in a very curious evening. As a matter of actual fact, there seemed no immediate cause for worry—which, everything considered, was possibly the most curious part of it all. Alone with two distinctly rough characters, there was apparently no danger. Themselves violent, they understood a violent person like herself.

What time was it? It should have been nearly morning! Miss Carson glanced at her watch and discovered that midnight was barely five minutes in the past. The mighty stillness of this isolated region, though, suggested rather the hour before dawn; she devoted herself for a little to

searching that stillness for sounds of an outer world. There seemed to be none; far away, so far that it might have floated down from another planet, she caught the faintest hint of a street car gong. That was all—and the only sound inside the wretched little hovel was the uneasy scuffing of Nick's feet, out in the hall.

So Miss Carson was at liberty to lay out her collected data on the situation and select whatever bits she found helpful. A girl named Ramsey, too generously, had presented her with a kidnaping. What Ramsey might that be? Myra reflected upon the homes of the very rich, pointed out by the well-informed Daisy from a bus top; she recalled no Ramsey among them. And it was an abduction which involved no ransom for the villains, which was another queer bit. Why should one steal a beautiful and wealthy maiden if not for the money thereby to be gained? Myra did not know. Further, speculating upon it just now was rather fruitless. She shifted restlessly and turned her thoughts into channels more easily navigable.

What had become of the dark person and the stolen car? He had been gone almost the full specified fifteen minutes now. And who was the "he" with whom a conversation had been so necessary? As to that, there was no way of guessing; but as to the dark person himself—well, if there was an alarm out for the car, as there must be, it really began to look as if he might have been taken in by uniformed authority.

And then what, reverting to Myra's own case? Well, for the one and only thing, she meant to leave this shack. Aye, even though it became necessary for her to scream until her throat burst, to fight them until—

"He's been gone more than fifteen minutes!" Myra said suddenly.

"Wotjer say, miss?" Joseph asked with a start. "That—that don't mean nothing! Maybe he had a—a breakdown or a blow-out. Y' gotter allow for that. He don't know much about cars, anyhow, and—"

"All that doesn't interest me a particle. I promised to be quiet for fifteen minutes and the time's up now."

"Well, lady, listen! Don't start noth-

ing. Give him a chance. Any guy can have trouble with a car."

Miss Carson arose and drew the wonderful fur coat about her. Joseph also arose, and Nick paused in the doorway to stare at them.

"True, and I have no real desire to 'start' anything, but I'm leaving nevertheless," the captive said sweetly. "So wouldn't it be just as well to let me walk out without any more nonsense?"

"Y' couldn't—not alone!" Joseph cried, with a touch almost of agony. "Not in this neighborhood, kid. Why, y' got no idea what a neighborhood this is. Near every night somebody's—hey, listen!"

His face glowing sudden relief, he held up a hand. And from the distance came the whine of the big car, nearer and nearer. Miss Carson merely stood and waited, with an eagerness almost equal to Joseph's. Something told her that now, after the most amazing and outrageous evening of her life, she was leaving!

The briskness of the steps outside, as the car stopped, fostered this notion, too. The dark man hurried in, no longer the worried person who had left a little while ago—although he was not beaming as one should beam who bears good news. He smiled slightly and very grimly, and that was all.

"D'je git him?" Joseph queried.

"I got him!" the leader snapped. "Get on your coat. We're moving now!"

"You mean—" Miss Carson began.

"Ever been t' Melford Manor, lady?" the dark one asked briskly.

"The suburb—in Westchester? No."

"Where the rich guys live. You're going there now!" supplemented the leader, and proffered her hat with an extremely businesslike jab. "Get that on, lady, and make it snappy, please! We wanter get started."

Miss Carson opened her eyes and regarded him coldly.

"But I haven't the slightest intention of going to Melford Manor or anywhere else, except back to the Aldean, you know," she explained serenely. "I thought you understood that? You'll have to—"

"Cut it, kid, cut it!" the leader of the band barked disappointingly. "You had

me guessing—I'll say you had me guessing. But I ain't guessing any more; I got your case doped out for me!" He laughed bitterly. "Say, will you put on that lid, or will I slam it on for you and call it a job?"

"What did you say?" Miss Carson demanded, and sent an angry little trill into her words and caused her eyes to dilate ominously.

For all its cowering effect, this demonstration might as well have been directed at a bronze statue. A small shiver ran through Miss Carson; in whatever way, that beastly telephone conversation seemed to have loosed her firm hold on the situation!

The dark man stepped directly to her and smiled with one side of his mouth.

"Kid, y' got just two bets," he explained tersely. "You can go quiet, and if you do that there ain't going to be one hair mussed. Or you can throw a couple them good fits and I'll tie you up and have you carried out like a sack o' meal! Which'll it be?"

"Neither!" Miss Carson cried, most emphatically. "How dare—"

"You're a bum guesser; it has to be one of them!" the leader laughed angrily. "And so long as you feel that way about it, I think I won't take any more chances on you. You're too slick, anyway. Hey, Nick! Chuck that rope here—the one in the closet!"

"Don't you dare—" Myra began again, although less sturdily.

"Come out of it!" the dark person barked. "I wanter treat you decent as I can, but if I have to get rough I can get rough. Sit down there!"

Queerly, Myra sat, with no protest whatever.

Rope swished about her feet, binding her ankles together most uncomfortably. More rope whisked about her hands and was knotted far too securely, and the chief of the bandits paused and considered her and then hurried into the kitchen and returned with a folded towel that was almost clean. Twenty seconds later, part of this towel was in Myra's mouth and part of it was outside her mouth, covering the adjacent territory; and winged flight just then would have been no more impossible to her than speech!

"Baby, I'll say you ain't going to be near so much trouble that way," the dark gentleman reflected aloud and approvingly. "Let's go! Pick her up, Joe! Wind that coat around her. Take her inside with you. I'll drive and keep Nick with me."

One more of the effortless swoops and Joseph had swung Miss Carson into the air again. The leader blew out the lamp on the table, while Nicholas did the same service for the one in Myra's late apartment. Then they passed out.

It may be conceded that Myra, while a person of remarkable nerve when conditions seemed to warrant nerve, was really no marvel. Joseph's arms, then, did not hold a fighting, struggling, stiffened and undaunted Amazon; on the contrary, the girl had turned so oddly limp that Joseph paused a moment in the doorway and stared down to see if she had fainted. She had not; she was only thunderstruck and thoroughly frightened, from the very marrow of her bones to the soft surface of her skin—a state which frequently afflicts those too suddenly deposed from absolute power. Even thought had turned distinctly wild. She might attempt battle—and find the huge arms pressing the very life out of her! She might try to shriek—and, for the first time in her life, feel the stunning blow of an angry man's fist! Nay, for the sickening present there was nothing to do, save nothing at all!

Humming to himself as if quite content with the later trend of affairs, the dark man hopped nimbly into the car, pulled down all the curtains, hopped out again and vaulted lightly into his seat behind the wheel. He beckoned, and with a series of grumblings the recent footman clambered to the seat beside him. Joseph bowed his head and stepped into the vehicle and deposited Miss Carson gently enough on the seat—and the engine started very quietly and they were off!

Yes, they were off for Melford Manor. And what? And why? What was to happen at Melford Manor? Was it the home of the mysterious "*him*?" And, assuming that to be the case, what were his designs upon Miss Carson? These and perhaps two dozen other equally fearsome questions

fitted and danced through Myra's mind before the wheels of the motor regained the smooth pavement. She moaned faintly and the recent chauffeur turned to her.

"Nothin' to it, kid; I dasseent take out that gag," he said briefly. "When the chief out there gives orders, y' don't buck 'em. That's all. Y' got no idea what a mean guy he is if you try t' hand him anything!"

He turned up his collar and hunched down, apparently averse to a conversation which must of necessity be one-sided. Myra Carson, then, pursued her own thoughts once more; and happily they grew rather calmer. There was something very definite behind all this crazy performance, of course. What? Well, what are the motives that rule the vast majority of human acts? The gain of money, for one—and for the other, love!

To the best of her guessing, she had not been abducted for profit. Could it be for love—for love, that is, of the canny Miss Ramsey who had stepped out of her proper rôle? *He!* He was infatuated with Miss Ramsey and, unable to win her in any other way, had adopted this method of acquiring her! That would account for the stringent orders that she was not to be injured, too. But it wouldn't account for the general change that had taken place since that telephone conversation, would it? So far as she could judge, the restrictions had been removed since that ill-starred talk; Miss Carson had already been treated with much more roughness than she relished—and an ardent lover never would permit that sort of thing.

Still, even as the hypothesis began to break down and dissipate, one little ray of hope remained: when "he" saw that he had kidnaped the wrong girl, she would be released. To tell about it and get them all into trouble? No, that wasn't likely, either. If he was really the violent and conscienceless person he seemed, it was far from impossible that he would order his crew of desperadoes to remove her to some lonely spot, and there—well, there was little use considering that grisly phase of the case, either!

Meanwhile they were bowling along

steadily. They must already have covered miles and miles on this second jaunt; judging by the absence of city sounds, they must also have traveled well into the country. Now and then a car passed them, roaring by in the other direction; again, they stopped for a considerable time, while a long train, just ahead, clattered past. And then, having bumped over the tracks, they swirled on again and on.

Later still—hours and hours later it seemed to Myra Carson, whose every muscle ached, and whose tender little mouth had achieved the condition of pure agony—they slowed down markedly. Now—again—even a third time, they swerved to the right side of the road and almost stopped; and on the last occasion Miss Carson caught fragments of conversation from the front seat!

"It is!" stated the footman.

"It ain't!" contended the dark man.

"The sign said it was Powling Road!"

"Certainly it did, but this ain't the house, y' poor fish!"

"Well, ain't that gate got sandstone pillars?" asked the footman tartly.

"White sandstone—white sandstone! Not red sandstone!" rasped the dark man very savagely. "F I don't find that damned house soon I'll drop this Jane in the ditch and let it go at that!"

The car started again with a jerk. The dark person seemed downright annoyed at the length of the ride—almost as much annoyed as was Myra Carson herself, in fact. A good quarter of a mile they whizzed wildly along State road; then they stopped suddenly, with a screeching of brakes and a scraping of locked wheels; and the wind outside whistled drearily through dry, crackling trees, and Miss Carson's heart dropped to her boots. Instinct, frequently reliable, informed her that this was *it!*

Joseph twitched up one of the curtains and peered out, heaving a little sigh of relief.

"Looks like we done it without getting pinched, kid!" he observed genially. "Sure! This is the dump. Here we go!"

The car had backed to a driveway gate, at either side of which stood white sandstone pillars. Now it rolled forward again

and Miss Carson, hitching forward painfully, gazed anxiously into the gloom.

It was a short, wide drive, the house itself standing back not more than forty or fifty feet from the highway. Only with difficulty did Myra discern the general outline of the building. It was neither particularly large nor particularly small; it might in daylight prove a very artistic dwelling; on the other hand it was certainly not the home of a rich man given to ostentation. Rather did it suggest the conventional suburban home of a sound, established business man of fair prosperity—and between such a person and the trio which had trapped her, *what* connection could exist?

The dark driver, having hopped to the ground, was skipping up the four steps to the veranda with a very blithe effect. In a perfectly matter of fact way, as if it had been noon instead of the small hours of the morning, he was pressing an electric button now; and from far off, through the limitless country stillness, came the whirring of a bell.

After that a considerable pause, wherein the wind moaned mournfully and the original chauffeur opened the door of the car and prepared to lift out Miss Carson. The dark man rang again, more emphatically, and keeping his finger on the button for some time—and results began to materialize. A light appeared suddenly in a third floor window; the window opened and the upper half of a gray-haired, heavily built woman leaned out.

"Message!" said the driver. "Come down and open the door!"

"I'll open no—no door to—" floated downward.

"Lady, will y' please come and take this message? I don't want t' rob your house. This is important, and I gotter deliver it. I'm sorry t' wake you up like this, lady, but I gotter deliver this message or lose my job!"

The woman hesitated visibly. Then, with an audible grunt, she closed the window and disappeared. Shadows indicated that she was working her way into some sort of dressing gown; another little wait ensued and the door opened a bare three inches.

"You pass in your message!" the lady directed warily, and at closer range her voice was harsh and unpleasing. "Do I have to sign anything?"

"No, ma'am! All you gotter do is to back up there!" replied the leader of the band as, more or less gently, he pushed the door wide open with his knee. "Now wait a second before y' start yelling, lady! There ain't one little thing going t' happen to you till you begin to whoop. Once you do that I can't answer for no consequences! Not for *no* consequences! Got that? Fine! Hey, Joe! Right this way!"

Aggressive brute that he was, he stepped straight into the foyer of somebody's home, while the elderly woman, hands clasped before her mouth, backed away from him.

"Step on it, Joe—little speed there!" the dark person called softly. "Got her out? That's the stuff—and *you* keep your nerve, lady. This dame ain't dead, by no means. She got unreasonable and she got roped. This way, Joe. Where's there a couch or a chair? Turn on them lights in there, lady."

As a woman might have moved in a horrible nightmare, so did the elderly woman move into a spacious and very pretty living room. Her trembling hand fumbled out and found the switch; lights flashed up. Into the glare of them, Miss Myra Carson, bound, gagged and helpless, was carried swiftly; and Joseph, who seemed to have a considerate streak, selected the comfortable couch and laid her gently thereupon.

"All over!" the leader of the band announced joyfully. "There's yer message, lady, all delivered and nothing t' sign for. Where's your boss? Go wake him up!"

"He's—he's stirring—stirring!" the woman mouthed, and pointed dizzily to the floor above. "Stirring—"

"Sure! I understood the first time; I hear him!" grinned the leader, and cocked an ear toward the ceiling. "Wait! I'll go up to him!"

He started for the wide corridor of the house; and as he did so hurried, shuffling footsteps sounded from the hallway above and then upon the stairs. Hands in his pockets, the brisk little bandit stepped out of sight to meet the approaching man.

And that would be the "him" they served, thought Miss Carson, and grew warmer and warmer, as fright trickled away and fury at the whole unspeakable proceeding began to mount! There were things which she must say to him—or explode! She looked directly at the hard-visaged, white-cheeked woman and moved her head suggestively, looking down at the gag. The lady, after two futile attempts at speech, only shook her head.

Now they were talking out in the hall—the dark man was, anyway, and some one else was trying to choke out words.

"So she's in there now! She's yours! I'm wishing you joy of her!" the dark man concluded.

"But I—but—oh, see here, sir! That's all rot! Absolute rot! And I won't tolerate—"

Miss Carson's eyes opened widely. She knew that voice!

CHAPTER VIII.

BETTER QUARTERS.

IT was a voice which she had heard very recently, and under no stress of emotion such as seemed to afflict it at present; and still, for the moment, Myra could not identify the owner.

He was tremendously excited just now, though.

"Absolutely preposterous, I tell you! I won't permit such a thing! You'll remove her instantly, I say, and—"

"Say it with music, brother!" the dark man laughed. "You gotter keep her now; and she's some chicken to have around, I'm telling you! She—what's that? Well, I got nothing to do with that! I don't know anything about that! He said he'd call you up and tell you about it. And he said it was your job whether you liked it or not!"

"I don't care a damn what he said!" the apparent owner of the house cried violently. "I will not permit—"

"All right! Chuck her out yerself, then. That's your lookout. I dunno what he's got on you to pull this, or what you got on him; only I'd think twice before I chucked

her. That'd be one bad guy t' double-cross—one *bad guy*!"

Instead of exploding, as might have been expected, the other remained utterly silent. From his general direction there came a sound of hoarse gasping—and then the dark little man's really happy laugh.

"So that'll be about all o' that, and I'm wishing you luck!" he concluded. "C'mon, boys!"

"But wait a moment! Please wait!" the familiar voice pleaded. "There's a mistake here—a terrible one, I assure you. I have no more to do with this than the man in the moon. I—see here! Take her with you and I'll make it very well worth your while!"

"You ain't got money enough t' pay her way back into my little house!" the leader laughed, boisterously almost. "That doll's got too much pep for an honest, hard-workin', peace-lovin' guy like me, mister. Come on, youse!"

This last seemed to penetrate Joseph. Toward Myra he directed a gay little farewell wave of the hand; then she was alone with the elderly woman, and three pairs of feet were tramping their way out of the house.

"One thing—" the familiar voice gasped.

"*Nothin'!*" corrected the dark man, as he slammed the door.

Nor were they wasting any time whatever about their departure. Outdoors the engine whirred noisily—gears ground—the long, familiar whine passed out of hearing in a matter of ten seconds. And Miss Myra Carson's social surroundings had moved a peg up the scale, and that was really about the only definite thing one could say!

Paralysis seemed to have attacked the gentleman in the corridor. There was no movement at all from that direction. But the elderly woman was coming back to life in a series of strange gulps; and the final one merged into a wail of:

"Oh, Dr. Warner! Dr. Warner! Dr. Warner! Oh, doctor—"

"Hush, please! Hush!" choked the person, stepping into the room quite suddenly.

Miss Carson jumped, despite her bonds. She knew now, of course: that was the

vague, rather handsome "Doc" who dined with the wealthy Westford person. Not that he was very attractive at the moment, to be sure. His thick hair was rumpled, his eyes were wild, and there was nothing modish in the long, quilted silk gown knotted about him. He advanced uncertainly, lips moving, and stared down at the well-trussed Myra Carson—and with a most dramatic gasp he threw up his hands and backed away a pace, the while he cried:

"That's not the girl! You're not the girl!"

"Hoh!" came unexpectedly from the elder lady. "So you *was* expecting a young woman, doctor?"

"I—what? No, emphatically not! Nothing of the kind, Mrs. Hodge! I—"

He flushed and glared at her. He turned back to Myra, considering her bonds. He reached toward her feet and then, obviously a delicate soul, reached toward her hands, fumbling quite crazily at the knots.

"I—just a minute, you know—have to apologize for all this, of course. Not my doing, but have to apologize!" he muttered irresponsibly. "I recognize you, of course. You're the young woman who makes change at the Aldean. None of my doing, I assure you! I—however, is this thing tied? I—what, Mrs. Hodge?"

"It's the telephone, doctor," the lady said from the doorway. "There's a man wants to talk to you."

The doctor started up.

"Oh, is there?" he snapped. "Well, I think I want to talk to that man!"

He strode out more or less impressively, his wide silk pyjamas flapping about his rather lean legs. Somewhere in the corridor Myra heard him thump into a chair and bark, more energetically than she would have fancied him capable of barking:

"Hello! Is this—"

He stopped there. The diaphragm of the receiver was clicking and clattering; so it clicked and clattered before:

"Yes, but—"

The clattering went on furiously for all of two minutes this time.

"Yes, I understand all that. I—"

Again his speech was stayed. Again he listened.

"I know all that. That's your business, sir!" Dr. Warner managed to force in presently. "I refuse to be involved in any way with such a mad—" The receiver emitted fifteen seconds of machine-gun fire. "Yes, I—I said 'refuse!'" the master of the house stated, much less forcefully. "That was the — er — the word I used, and—"

The gunner went to work again, never pausing for breath for another minute.

"Oh! God bless my soul, Mr. Westford!" cried the doctor, and there was genuine pain and fear in this new tone. "You'd never do a thing like that when—"

Somebody laughed at the other end of the telephone line and spoke further. The gentleman at this end groaned aloud and said nothing for another stretch. Then:

"Well, I—yes, I understand that! I couldn't quite have—have believed that you—but I understand. Be sure of that. Only I wish that you'd called up before they came. What's that, sir? Yes, you're quite right; there'd have been nobody at home. But what I've been trying to say all this time: it's not the right girl!"

A single tremendous roar of inquiry floated over the wire.

"No! Most decidedly not! It's the cashier girl from the Aldean Hotel, I tell you! Well, I haven't the slightest idea how it happened, but that's the girl they brought! No, I'm not mistaken. I noticed her particularly, you recall, and said what a very pretty girl she was, and—"

"Hoh!" said Mrs. Hodge, looking fixedly at Myra Carson.

The telephone wire had gone quite mad! There was a prolonged howl of fury upon it now which should have shaken it from its insulators! Dr. Warner apparently was waiting for the storm to pass—and it passed suddenly, with the loud bang of the receiver at the far end.

"Look here, sir! I won't be called a damned fool like that, and I can't possibly—" the doctor exploded. "I say, you haven't cut off, have you? I—here! There's more I want to say and—oh, the devil!" gasped the gentleman, and hung up his own instrument with a crash.

"Oho!" said Mrs. Hodge, altogether to

herself and just aloud. "All sorts of fancy ways they take to cover up their little—hooh!"

And she considered Myra with her hard eyes and murmured:

"*Brazen, too! Hoh!*"

There was some ground for this, Miss Carson's expression considered. Doubtless it was an odd expression, for Miss Carson's thoughts were moving with the utmost rapidity. Bit by bit, as the strange night passed, they were permitting her to piece matters together and at least approach an answer. It might be incredible, his reputed wealth considered. It was a long way from impossible; a man with eyes like Westford's was potentially capable of absolutely anything! But possible or incredible or anything else, Westford seemed to be at the root of the thing. Westford was the venerated "he" of her original hosts.

As for the rest of it? At the moment she was not interested in the finer details. Most of Miss Carson's days had been spent in radiating sunshine; but there is a certain quantity of rage stowed away somewhere within the sweetest of us, and her whole supply was trying to make the surface tonight! Plain, cold fury consumed her at the indignities which had been inflicted on her. It was a very unpleasant eye that met Dr. Warner's as he entered and set about her release.

"Couldn't have believed it possible—positively, I could not have!" he stated, as he worked loose the knots at Myra's wrist. "Now, will you—er—raise your head, please, and permit me to undo that filthy rag. Thank you!" He turned to the elder woman. "Mrs. Hodge! The young lady's—er—ankles! Will you free them, if you please?"

A tiny smile twitched down one corner of the lady's mouth as she obeyed. The towel came out of Myra's mouth and the pale Warner smiled nervously and ingratiatingly.

"There, Miss—ah—"

"My name is—Carson—Myra Carson," the captive submitted, with more than a little difficulty, as her abused lips moved again.

"Carson, to be sure," said the doctor.

"Mine is Dr. Warner—not a physician, by the way. Mining expert, I'm supposed to be. I—er—I—er—"

Further than this he seemed unable to go at the moment. His vague, pale glance moved in the direction of the elderly woman, and he started and frowned and lost some of his pallor as he caught the extreme canniness of the light in her eye.

"Er—Mrs. Hodge!" said he, with some assumption of dignity. "I think you may return to your room now, if you will. The excitement, I am sure, is over."

The lady arose with a small grunt, smiling until the one corner of her mouth seemed on the point of curving down around her jaw bone!

"Very well, sir. I've no wish to stay here, Heaven knows!" the lady stated, as she shuffled out.

Her steps mounted slowly. Dr. Warner considered Myra with swiftly growing perplexity. Myra merely faced him steadily with an entirely inscrutable stare. A number of startling ideas were taking shape in her young brain; several of them were wild and senseless as the evening itself, but one at least she felt to be perfectly sane and sound.

So they remained until a door slammed far above and the doctor cried explosively:

"Upon my word, I think you're—you're the most remarkable young woman in the world!"

"Compliment?"

"Eh? I—I'm blest if I know what it is!" the scientist stammered. "I—you see, I'd expected an outburst, of course—an outburst of rage and—ah—protest and all that sort of thing. You—you say nothing!"

"It seems to me," Miss Carson said coolly, "that you're the one who should be saying a good deal, right now!"

"In—in the way of apology?"

"That's a rather mild little word for a thing like this, isn't it?"

The doctor opened his lips, and closed them again. There was no very masklike quality to his countenance; watching him casually, one could read what passed in his mind quite accurately. Here, it seemed, was a young woman to be handled with the

utmost caution. So the doctor produced a smile that was almost oily.

"You're a very unusual girl—a most extraordinary girl!" he stated, gently. "You astonish me so that I hardly know what to say, save to assure you, on my very solemn word of honor, that I have had absolutely no part in this outrage!"

"You don't look a bit like a humorist, but that is funny!"

"Well—er—you mean that you don't believe it?"

"I do!"

"But it's the gospel truth, I assure you!" Dr. Warner said, with gathering warmth. "I'm an extremely conventional person; I wouldn't consider taking part in a thing of this character for any consideration on earth! At this moment I'm positively unable to credit my own eyes and believe that it *has* happened—but it has, of course, and while I've an inkling of the matter I'm positively not at liberty to say one word about it. Extraordinary statement for me to make, perhaps, but quite true. It so happened that you were mistaken for another person and—that's how it all came about, of course."

"Miss Ramsey, you mean?"

"Lord! You know that, do you? Well—that's natural enough, I suppose. But as to my part of it, which is really all that concerns us just now, I'm going to make an astounding request: I'm going to ask you to forgive and forget!" said the doctor, and failed to meet Myra's eyes.

That young woman caught her breath.

"Well, you're clumsy but courageous, aren't you?" she mused. "I'm just to step out of the house here and erase from my memory the trifle of having been kidnaped?"

"It's an insane thing to ask, but *you're* big enough to do that!" the remarkable doctor said fervently, and plainly in the belief that he was on the way to making his point. "And I'm by no means asking you to step out of the house or—er—anything of that sort. You live at the Aldean?"

"Well?"

"I'll dress as quickly as possible, get out my car and drive you home at once, to be

sure," the optimistic doctor raced on. "And you may be quite certain, Miss Carson, that you will not suffer by arriving at that hour. It is past two now, but I can have you there by four o'clock, and I'll explain to the night manager that—I'm not quite sure at the moment just what I shall say, but it will be convincing to the last degree!"

Ten silent seconds, he waited tremulously. Miss Carson sighed and settled back comfortably, and this the good doctor must have misinterpreted, for he brightened amazingly and started toward the door.

"Doctor!" Myra said.

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't go to all the bother of dressing if you were not going to leave the house on my account, would you?"

"I beg pardon?"

"Because I wish that you'd sit down here for a minute or two, without fussing like that. It's barely possible you're not going out at all, you know. That chair there, please!"

"I don't—quite understand?"

"You will, though," said Miss Carson, as the scientist settled uncomfortably on the edge of the chair before her. She herself, wrists and ankles having ceased to pain, and pretty mouth having returned to normal size, leaned forward and studied him interestedly.

"Doctor, it would be perfectly lovely of me to let you drive me back and shake your hand and then say how glad I was to have met you and then forget all about it, would it not?"

The doctor's eyes opened alarmedly.

"It is the sort of act *you* might—" "

"—do if I happened to be a congenital idiot, only I'm not a congenital idiot!" Myra finished for him. "This little plot that you and Mr. Westford cooked up over your dinner seems to have slipped."

"I say!" breathed the doctor. "Er—Mr. Westford—"

Myra waved an impatient hand.

"I'm not asking details. I'm not even commenting," she snapped. "I'm trying to point out that, in slipping, it collided with a most unfortunate person—*me!* I don't know what sort of fool you're used

to handling, but I'm not that sort. I do know that I have been brought to *your* house greatly against my will, and that you yourself have me now, also against my will."

"That part of it—" the doctor began wildly.

"So that you're a party to a rather serious crime, are you not?"

"I am not! Before Heaven, I swear to you that—"

"A crime for which, I fancy, you may have to serve a very long and inconvenient sentence somewhere," Miss Carson concluded, and held him fast with her unpleasant eye.

The doctor seemed to crumple a little; his faint smile grew sad.

"I see, of course. You do want money, Well, I don't blame you, Miss Carson; you're fully entitled to compensation, and I shall insist that you have it. Not from myself, of course. I'm—wretchedly tied up in some matters. But I shall see to it!"

"I'm not sure that it's money that I want."

"Eh?"

"No, I think that—much more than mere money—I need a home!" Myra said smoothly.

"I—I fear that I don't quite get your meaning?" said Dr. Warner, and his eyes clouded. "Er—an apartment? A—just what *do* you mean?"

"Chiefly that I like this place very much indeed. Where is the guest chamber—the nicest one?"

"You—you're—you're not planning to remain *here*?" the scientist gasped.

"I am!"

"Oh, but—oh, my dear young lady! That's impossible! That's absolutely not to be thought of! That's the most impossible idea in the world!"

"Is it really?" Myra asked, without great interest. "Why?"

"Because—because—oh, because—" mouthed the doctor, and there was a hint of madness in his tone. "I—I'm alone here with Hodge—the housekeeper, you know—Hodge!"

"She looks as if she might be a very efficient chaperon," Myra said unsmilingly.

"She—yes, perhaps! But the idea will never do, Miss Carson—never!" cried Dr. Warner. "You see—oh, you're joking, of course! You're such a sane, pleasant little person that—"

"I'm not!" Miss Carson contradicted. "I'm the most unpleasant person you ever knew! Being downright unpleasant is the best thing I do just now, and I'll be much better at it when I've had more practice. You don't believe that? I'll try to prove it! I refuse absolutely to leave this house until I'm thoroughly ready to leave!"

"But—"

"Let me finish! In all probability you're physically capable of throwing me out bodily. It may be, if you insist upon it, that I shall leave without any such assistance. Only, if I *do* go away from here one minute before it suits my sweet pleasure to go, I'll make for the nearest constable or sheriff and get one warrant for your arrest and another for Westford's! Is that reasonably clear?"

"Too—too clear!" the doctor said throatily.

"Need anything more be said?"

"One—one thing, perhaps," the scientist forced out. "Should it—be possible to keep you here, about how long were you—were you thinking of honoring me with your presence, Miss Carson?"

Myra, patting her hair back into shape, glanced up almost annoyedly and shrugged her shoulders.

"Why, I can't tell you anything definite about that now, of course. I shall have to see. I may leave to-morrow. I may stay a week—or a month, for that matter. If everything is as comfortable as it seems, I may even decide to remain permanently. By the way, shall I walk out, with the assurance that you'll put me out if I don't?"

"I—wouldn't do that," breathed the doctor.

And then he gathered his wavering forces and stared penetratingly at Miss Carson. It was obvious that he sought at once to read her very soul and to implant therein the element of fear, which a strong, mature man surely should have found it easy enough to implant in the soul of a helpless young girl.

But it chanced that Myra Carson gazed back so much more penetratingly, with such a wicked little gleam in her eye and such a wealth of self-confidence on every feature that the doctor caught his difficult breath and moved his lips strangely and soundlessly, the while what little remained of his color faded out.

(To be continued NEXT WEEK.)

Miss Carson yawned.

"You're rude about answering questions," she said. "I asked you, where is the guest chamber—the nicest one?"

The doctor's eyes fell and one unsteady finger pointed upward.

"It's—just above—this room!" he croaked hoarsely.



The Fist in Pacifist

By JOHN D. SWAIN

THE first Monday in June has been "slap day" at Kingston since grass has grown on its campus, and water run from the old college pump.

At twilight on this day the juniors perch for the first time on the campus fence, silent and apprehensive. The dormitory windows are filled with underclassmen and their guests, but the campus is roped off. Presently a file of black-gowned seniors emerges from Dilworthy Hall—an edifice of vast antiquity, erected in the era of horse cars, gas street lamps, and gold toothpicks attached to watch chains—and makes for the trembling juniors. Here and there one is

singled out for a hearty slap on the back, as one or the other of the senior societies thus signifies its choice.

Cæstus is for the red-blooded, and gathers in the varsity stars; Book and Worm favors the blue-stocking crowd, the scholars and orators; Domus Aurea seeks the silk-stockings, the Prom chairman, the owner of the most expensive car, the men with registered great-grandparents.

All are desirable societies, with elaborate clubhouses and pretty pins; but Sarcophagus is the supreme goal of every Kingston man. Alone among the societies, it stands for no definite type of candidate. It would

not be easy to explain just what it is that makes a junior eligible. It draws from all ranks, but never slaps more than ten men in one year. On two years, it found none worthy to enter the severe bronze portal of its windowless, granite house, the replica of a famous tomb. The following year, the first two men it slapped were the grandson of the President of these United States, and the son of Maggie, who for a quarter of a century had been charwoman of one of the college dormitories.

Last year it gave the accolade to three: "Maude" Jillson, a youth with a Greek profile who had lived it down by proving that his corpuscles were of the right color; "Scab" Burke, whose father was president of one of the three great labor unions of the country, and "Pax" Rogers. They were fairly representative of the three social classes, were liked by the undergraduate body, and not unpopular with the faculty.

Before a candidate for *Sarcophagus* is deemed worthy to receive the sacred and esoteric rite of initiation within the hallowed tomb itself, he must undergo an ordeal in public. It is this feature which brings joy to town and gown alike. So severe are these tests of courage, moral and physical, that it is not uncommon to have a boy whose very marrow yearns for the right to wear the little gold and black enameled coffin which proclaims that he has won Kingston's rarest gift, weaken and collapse at the accomplishment of this preliminary requirement.

So it fell out last year. Burke was commanded to write a passionate appeal for the open shop in industries, coupled with a violent attack upon union methods, and to publish this in a prominent newspaper under his own name, with the caption: "Labor Leader's Son Revolts."

After pacing the floor of his study all night long he balked at the barrier.

Maude Jillson was required to array himself in modish feminine attire—short skirt, rolled silk stockings, wig, sweet little toque, and with rouged cheeks and scented handkerchief to proceed at nigh noon to the most exclusive of the city's schools for young ladies, and make an earnest effort to enroll as a student.

Unlike Scab Burke, Jillson made heroic efforts to accomplish his task. He walked—as in a nightmare—to the iron gate of Miss Teller's seminary, and tripped up its flagged walk. When a scandalized gardener attempted to turn him back Maude knocked him flat with an unladylike fist, but not without having his wig disarranged, and one sleeve of his waist torn off, revealing a freckled, muscular arm. Proceeding up to the door he rang, and when the maid who answered his summons screamed and tried to close the door, he forced his way within.

Further details are matter of rumor. It is certain that Miss Teller, severe as an abbess, swept down upon him from the regions above, and that there were at the time two classes of girls passing through the hall, on their way to or from lectures. Whatever may have happened, Jillson presently emerged from Miss Teller's seminary, sped through the yard, and at the gate ran into an officer summoned by the gardener. Here he was arrested, and walked half a mile to the police station, followed by several hundred fellow students and citizens, all in a most genial mood.

He was bailed out and reclothed, and the following morning paid a fine of twenty dollars for masquerading in woman's garb. Thus ended his effort to become a *Sarcophagian*.

The third man, Rogers, was called *Pax* because of his pacifist principles.

Pax was earning his way through college. At first as agent for a laundry, and for the past two years as operator of a dining club, he had managed to pay his bills and contribute to all the extra-curriculum subscriptions. He was a simon-pure pacifist who, nevertheless, held the love and esteem of the turbulent undergraduate body.

He was local president of the Intercollegiate Disarmament Society, and always occupied a seat on the platform at any meeting held in the interests of peace, tranquility and brotherly love. He had not been a draft evader, but had volunteered for the Red Cross before his country became involved, and had been decorated for bravery. He was a rangy, knobblly youth with big bones and whipcord sinews, obviously designed by nature for an ideal fullback; but

because he positively refused to use the straight-arm or to try to put his opponents out every time he tackled, he was not regarded as a possibility for the varsity team. The stoicism with which he endured punishment from others, and a habit of never losing his head, made him a fine punching bag, however, and he had played for two years on the scrub, of which he was now captain.

Homely, awkward, loyal and clean, he was one of the best loved men in Kingston, and his election to Sarcophagus pleased everybody.

For Rogers, a peculiarly obnoxious test was invented, a test which was of course based upon what was considered to be his one weakness.

It chanced that Battling Riley, the American middleweight champion, was scheduled the following week to meet a rugged New England fighter at Kingston in a ten-round, no decision go. Both because the champion was always a drawing card, and because Bimbo Dunn had been born in the city of Kingston, the bout was certain to be the big professional event of the year. Since no decisions were permitted by the State Commission, interest centered entirely in the Bimbo's chance of lasting out the ten rounds. The betting was two to one that Riley would put him away; and the local man's followers were staking much money on the short end.

For several days after he had been slapped Pax received no instructions. It was not until his two fellow candidates had failed to qualify that a secret emissary of Sarcophagus visited him in his room in old North Middle and confided to him the pleasing ordeal which, lest it come to the ears of Battling Riley, was not made public.

Pax was commanded to enter the lobby of the Kingston Arms, the leading hotel at which Riley's manager had engaged the Presidential suite, and at an hour when the place was certain to be thronged with fans from both town and gown, was to approach the champion face to face and remark in clear, ringing tones: "Riley, you big hunk of cheese, you've got a streak of yellow as wide as the campus!"

Nothing more. After that Rogers's time

was his own, his little stunt accomplished. As Riley was known to be a particularly pompous, hot-tempered character, it was felt that a good time would be had by all. All, that is, but Pax!

A committee representing Sarcophagus would be present to see that their simple instructions were carried out; after which whatever might remain of Pax Rogers would also be carried out, the mystic rites performed over him, and he would be entitled to wear the little gold and black coffin which is rated by Kingston as a little higher than the V. C. or the D. S. M., and incomparably above all such trivial emblems as linked chains, squares and compasses, or the effigies of antlered beasts.

The peaceful one listened gravely and without comment to the utterances of the secret emissary. Such is the traditional etiquette of the occasion. When he had formally bowed him out, and, seated alone at his study table, gave the matter his prayerful thought, his first impulse was to renig. But his first thought was neither his last, nor his best. For reasons peculiar to himself, he was very greatly desirous of making Sarcophagus. It was a dazzling climax coveted by all true Kingstonians; but to Pax it meant compensation for much that he had missed.

Certain extra-curriculum activities were barred to him because of poverty. He could not bedeck himself in the glad scenery beguilefully set forth in the windows of the college haberdashers. He was unable to assume the staggering expense of seeing his girl through the gorgeous junior prom and its attendant festivities; and he suffered more over her disappointment than his own. Because of it he had not even gone stag. There were, in each year, other deprivations imposed upon him by a lean wallet; other sides of college life which he could never look back upon in riper years. Election to the haughtiest of the senior societies would go far to assuage his little griefs.

The fact that neither of the men slapped with him had qualified, that both had balked at the barrier, was an added incentive. Pride beckoned him on. After all—why not? He was under no obligation to sacrifice his principles. He would not be

expected to fight Battling Riley! There would be no disgrace in running away from a champion pugilist, trained to the hour for his own specialty. The press would get the story, everybody would laugh over it, and the successful candidate would be applauded as a nervy chap who got his orders, and carried them out to the letter. Riley himself—reading the story—would harbor no resentment. It would be good advertising for him.

Of course he would resent the insult. He wouldn't be half a man if he didn't! And quite naturally he would attempt to wipe it out in gore. Pax Rogers's gore. But Pax felt certain that he could count upon a full second or two of stupefaction on Riley's part, that a stripling should dare address him thus. Doubtless, seeing him draw nigh, he would suppose him one among the hundreds of admirers who yearned to fawn upon him, bask in his presence, shake his hairy fist, and be able forever thereafter to say: "Battling Riley? Sure I know him!"

Then would come Pax's crude vituperation out of the mouth of a suckling. A gasp—a widening of eyes and then the annihilating fist. And during this gasp—this brief paralysis—Pax would drop his head and, seeking his opening—or making one—charge through the pop-eyed throng in the lobby, and flee as one striving for a touch-down.

Pax could run a hundred yards in eleven seconds flat, clad in moleskins, sweater and cleated boots, with a football under one arm. He had never yet been tackled from behind. And never before had such an incentive spurred him on as would be furnished by a berserk middleweight three paces in the rear! Riley would not follow him very far. Pax knew the Kingston streets like a newsboy; but if worse came to worst, once in the suburbs, there was a good turnpike running clear to Manhattan.

Pax smiled, shook hands with himself, and went to bed to dream of walking for miles and miles between double files of statesmen, athletes, soldiers and pretty girls, each of whom pointed to the gold and black enameled insignia of *Sarcophagus*, and sighed enviously if a man, or smiled dazzling if a maiden!

It was characteristic of him that having come to a decision he dismissed the affair from his mind. The very next evening he accepted an invitation to speak at a meeting called to protest against the disgraceful exhibition between Battling Riley and the Bimbo. He was never in better form, and his remarks were applauded by battalions of old ladies and timid old gentlemen, and were quoted in full in the morning papers.

"Saddening as this blood-lust is, this inheritance of the old Roman coliseum which leads two low-browed morons to pound each other for hire, they are respectable compared with the men and even, alas, women and boys who pay admission to witness a debasing spectacle! To call it 'the manly art' is an insult to intelligence. It is neither manly nor an art. If we cannot prevent this cruel and bloody exhibition, let us at least register our vigorous disapproval of that which rouses only the basest passions and helps postpone the day of brotherly love and universal altruism."

Loud applause, and much waving of lavender-scented handkerchiefs rewarded the young collegian as he resumed his seat.

Battling Riley did not read of the meeting, and wouldn't have been interested if he had. There were nuts who couldn't see anything in a good scrap, he knew; and his press agent loved them like brothers and sisters. They were a great, free advertisement for him. Nor had the champion ever heard of Pax Rogers. He knew that there was a college in Kingston, and counted on its undergraduates to help swell the gate receipts. An old sparring partner of his had once taught boxing here, and once he had sold a bull pup to a Kingston graduate. That was all he knew about this particular institution.

At four o'clock the day after Pax's speech, the lobby of the Kingston Arms was comfortably filled with its own guests, a big squad of newspaper and camera men, local sporting characters, college youths, girls of the flapper type, and as many nondescripts as dared to pass the huge and haughty doorman of the great hotel.

It was not easy to get near the champion, who leaned against a pillar beside his manager, shaking hands in a bored manner

with enthusiastic strangers, answering questions fired at him by zealous young reporters, smirking at the pretty girls who stood on the very tips of their smart little boots to get a glimpse of the fighting male.

Pax, strolling in at a quarter past the hour, decided to wait until the crowd thinned out a bit before getting his errand over with. He sank into a big leather chair, closely observed by three stern, silent men detailed by Sarcophagus to see that he omitted no detail.

Beside him sat a plump, nervous little sport who looked like a prosperous traveling agent. He tapped the young man on the arm.

"A fine-built feller, hey, mister? I betcha he wouldn't take no back talk from any man alive! Am I right?"

"Oh, I don't know," Pax responded listlessly.

Then, as a thought occurred to him, a twinkle came to his eyes.

"I'll bet I could walk right up to him now and call him a big cheese, and get away with it!"

"I got fifty says you ain't got the noive, mister!"

The little man dug suggestively in his pants' pocket.

Pax hesitated, and then he, too, fished his pockets. He had a trifle over ten dollars with him.

"Can I throw in my watch?" he asked.

"Lemme see it!"

The sport pried it open as a squirrel opens a nut, and squinted wisely into its inwards.

"It ain't worth it, but just to be a sport, I'll let it go in for twenty dollars," he decided.

"Wait a minute, then."

Pax rose, crossed over to a group of classmates, and after a brief consultation, turned with twenty dollars.

"Here's my fifty, then," he said. "Who shall we get to hold it?"

The captain of the bell hops—invariably a sporting gentleman—was decided upon, as both knew him. He pocketed the money, together with Pax's watch.

"Here's where ya lose a timepiece, feller!" he said. "Nobody can call that bird outa his name and keep his health!"

"Oh, I don't know," Pax murmured.

The crowd was not quite so dense now. He rose, drew a deep breath, buttoned his coat, and began to work his way slowly toward the center of the lobby, where the gorgeously arrayed battler was "telling the world," from one corner of his wide, cruel mouth.

Let it not be thought that Pax was sustained by the gallant spirit of the martyr, the leader of forlorn hopes. The publicity irked him, but he felt not the slightest tremor of fear. Riley, he had doped it out, would either deluge him with vulgar profanity, or he would reach for his jaw. He would be justified in doing either, or both; but Pax would not remain to hear, or feel. He would be charging down the lobby toward Main Street. He would return to collect his bet on a more auspicious occasion!

The middleweight glanced apathetically at the youth who stood before him, and made ready to shake hands for the seven hundred and thirty-first time that day. But Pax did not tender his hand, nor did his face break out into the fawning smile of a fistic fan. Instead, he looked Riley square in the eyes, and in a high, clear voice like one reciting something carefully memorized he cried: "*Riley, you big hunk of cheese, you've got a streak of yellow as wide as our campus!*"

The pugilist did not know what a campus was; but the rest of the sentence was perfectly clear to him, being garnished with the simple yet beautiful figures of speech he himself oft employed. A flicker of utter incredulity in his eyes was instantly quenched by simian rage.

Riley might be in nearly every conceivable respect inferior to Pax Rogers. But he possessed to the fullest degree one attribute that every successful fighter must have. He may be out of condition; a coward, both moral and physical; muscle-bound, yellow even; and still win many a fight. But this one quality he must have: his reaction time must be so infinitesimal that the response of the muscle must seem to coincide with, or even to precede, conscious thought.

It was so with Riley; and it made all the careful plans of Pax count for naught. For he did not curse nor strike, as his reply to

the unthinkable insult resounded in this place of many ears. Instead, his left hand shot out with the speed of an adder's tongue, and gripped the boy's coat collar as an entomologist's tweezers seize upon a rare bug.

For the first time in his life Pax was scared—and dangerous! All scared animals are dangerous up to, and beyond, their utmost capacity to damage and hurt. And Pax Rogers's capacity was enormous and unplumbed. No man can play football for three years as a scrub and be anything but a tough bird.

Pax felt himself imprisoned, saw Riley's right fist clenched, knew that at the very least a broken nose or jaw impended. He flung himself at Riley's feet, clutched him about the legs, upended him and stood him on his head.

No man, however hard or hollow his pan, is any the better for being dropped onto a floor composed of large squares of black and white marble. Riley came up, but he was groggy. He was full of fight, but could not have told his own name. Sheer instinct caused him to lash out at Rogers.

The crowd had closed in so that escape was cut off. Pax had to stay and defend himself. He did so in the only way he knew how. Instead of trying to parry the blows, he acted as if this were a football game, and Riley a plunging back. He left the floor in a clean, diving tackle that slammed Riley down so hard that his lungs became a vacuum. Then he picked him up, whirled him in the air as if he were a club, and felled three or four more or less innocent bystanders.

A surge of the crowd, a little opening, and Pax was through, head down, knees and elbows high. At the portal he met the huge doorman, who was coming in. The uniformed giant cascaded down the steps and halfway across the street before fetching up against a taxicab.

Pax Rogers made splendid time back to his room on the campus, and he did not leave it until the following morning, nor would he unlock to the persistent hammering of many visitors.

He always had a cup of coffee before chapel, at a little lunch wagon round the corner. No other student dreamed of doing

better than making chapel sufficiently clad to pass muster. So Pax met no one he knew as he bought a morning paper, and walked to the lunch cart.

He found that Battling Riley and himself divided most of the front page between them, and about all of the sporting section. His own feat was played up in traditional style, and was about what he had expected, save that certain dramatic features made it of rather more interest than usual to the Kingston public. The genuine sensation was that Bimbo Dunn had not only stayed the limit with the champion, but had outpointed him so far that he must have received the decision, had one been allowed!

For the first time that term Pax cut chapel this morning. He drank three cups of coffee before he had finished the paper he usually spent ten minutes on.

Then he remembered the single letter that he had found in the dormitory box; a cheap-looking envelope, bearing no return address, and with unfamiliar handwriting. He opened it and read:

MR. ROGERS:

I'm the man you made the bet with about you'd call Riley a big cheese. I'll be honest with you. I'm Bimbo Dunn's handler and I got a wrong steer that this here Riley hadn't done no training, and was a sick man. Well, when I see him there in the Kingston Arms I knew I was a sucker, because if he was a sick man I'm Sarah Bernhardt. So when you sat down and I see you was a husky guy I framed you to go in and start something with Riley and figured before he killed you maybe you'd anyhow mess him up a little so my man could stay the limit that night. Because, you see, I'd went and bet all the money I had, and a lot besides. Mister, I got to hand it to you! You done great. I made my pile all right when I thought I was a bankruptcy sure. And to show you I'm no piker inclose my check for five hundred fish which you earned it, besides save the life of

Yours,
(Signed) BERNIE ROSOFF.

Pax Rogers was still staring at the check in a dazed sort of way when a dignified young man tapped him on the shoulder.

"Be at the dread portals to-night at ten o'clock! Come alone, and wear your oldest clothes."

Thus spake Sarcophagus!



The Ju-Ju Man

By THOMAS H. GRIFFITHS and
ARMSTRONG LIVINGSTON

Authors of "*The Soul of the Lamp*," "*The Diamond Theft*," etc.

CHAPTER IX.

AMBUSH.

WHILE Rushton and M'Buli were conducting their private investigations along the Bololo trail, back in the Kroobos' quarters Mrs. Holden had recovered consciousness for a space and demonstrated that her frail body was really as stout as her heart. She managed to gasp out what she knew of the raid and the part that she had taken in the destruction of the factory, and then sank into a deep and healing slumber which promised to leave her well on the road to recovery.

Holden enjoyed one moment of grim satisfaction when he learned that the contents

of the storeroom had been destroyed and the thieving savages balked to that extent; but the crowning addition to his load of sorrow came with Rushton's news that Celia had been kidnaped and borne away by the raiders. The old trader was nearly prostrated by the fresh blow, and his head fell upon his chest in a complete abandonment to despair.

"I don't know what I have done to deserve this," he muttered, passing his hand wearily across his forehead. He started to say something further, but his senses finally cracked under the strain to which they had been subjected, and he sank unconscious into Rushton's arms. Water, and a drink of brandy, speedily revived him, but

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his brief collapse warned Fred that the man had drawn close to the end of his physical strength.

"Are you better now, sir?" he asked anxiously.

Holden smiled wanly and attempted to rise.

"I'm quite all—" he began, but before he could finish the sentence his eyes closed and his head fell forward. For an instant Fred thought that he had fainted again, but examination revealed the fact that the exhausted Holden had done nothing more serious than fall sound asleep.

Rushton left him there and went in search of M'Buli, but he discovered that worthy entirely lost to the world and snoring vigorously in the shade of a tree. His men had not waited for him to set the example, and glancing about at their recumbent forms, Fred knew that, for the second time in twenty-four hours his nervous desire for action was balked by the sheer need for rest. He flung himself upon the grass near the chief, with an impatient sigh and a firm conviction that sleep was impossible, and in two minutes his aching heart and troubled mind had found the nepenthe of oblivion.

When he awakened dusk had fallen and the purple shadows of night were creeping from the jungle and enfolding the compound. The Batatekes, admirable opportunists at all times, were cooking the evening meal over the smoldering timbers of the factory, and while he still lay half asleep a dish of food was brought to him by M'Buli himself. He shook his head at first, but nature asserted herself forthwith in no uncertain fashion, and he was presently eating as ravenously as his black companion.

The Batateke grinned and nodded approval as the last morsel vanished down the young man's throat. The two men had taken a distinct liking to each other during the past two days. Rushton could not but admire the capable way in which the chief handled his men and looked unceasingly to their comfort, and the obedience and devotion with which the natives regarded their headman told its own story to his credit.

M'Buli's idea of what constituted a good

citizen was naturally based upon primitive, if sound, conception. Fred, in the chief's opinion, measured up to the standard. In the night run from Gama he had shown himself possessed of physical endurance rare in a white man; in his rescue of Holden from the gorilla he had demonstrated quickness and courage; and in his obvious passion for Celia and his determination to wreak vengeance upon her abductors he had proved himself capable of the primal emotions of love and revenge. If anything further went to the making of a man, M'Buli didn't know what it was.

Although Rushton's knowledge of the Batateke dialect was about as extensive as the chief's grasp of English, the two men were able, by patient effort, to talk together. While they ate their meal, M'Buli told the other of things that had happened while the young man slept. A sergeant of police had drifted upon the scene from Mafadi and interviewed Holden, who had been aroused for the purpose. Apparently the conversation had not been productive of much result. The man had politely but stubbornly insisted that he could do nothing until his superior returned from his shooting trip, whereupon the trader had delivered a withering commentary on the Congo government from its royal head down to the sergeant, whom he described, to the huge delight of the attendant Batatekes, as a bit of hyena food. He had then ordered the man off the place and, according to the chief, felt much better for his righteous wrath.

He confirmed this in person a minute later by striding briskly up to the place where they were sitting. His carriage was erect, his eyes sparkled with new life, and his speech was firm and terse as he told Fred how he had been occupied. Mrs. Holden had recovered sufficiently to be moved, and he had taken her in a canoe to Mafadi, where he left her in the care of an old missionary and his wife. He had purchased a large quantity of provisions and ammunition to replace the stuff destroyed in the fire, and had then hurried back to the ruins of his factory as anxious as Fred to start in pursuit of the scoundrels who had kidnaped his daughter.

"They have headed for the Pallaballa Mountains, I suppose?" asked Rushton.

"Of course," replied Holden, and M'Buli nodded assent.

The black chief was not as concerned about the possible loss of his gold as might have been expected. He came of a race that is not easily worried, and moreover, in the course of an adventurous life, he had picked up one bit of practical philosophy that he now contributed in his broken English.

"Bad fella quarrel quick," he said; "good fella a' right."

"There's a lot in that," admitted Holden thoughtfully. "I learned enough about these two ruffians in Mafadi to convince me that they're strangers to the Congo, and the only way they could have got the Bololos to help them was by the promise of a big share in the booty. I believe M'Buli is right. We will get our innings when they start to divide the spoil."

The trader was deeply interested in Rushton's account of the token that the chief had identified as belonging to C'Wayo. He knew the fetish doctor by reputation, and believed him to be a man of good character and reasonably honest.

"He's a bit of a mystery," added Holden. "He has been in this neighborhood as long as the oldest man can remember, but there is a tradition that he's not a native of the Congo. He must be as old as the hills. I believe that most of the tribes about here are scared to death of him. If he is trailing the Bololos either for purposes of his own or out of gratitude to Celia, it is the one bright spot in the whole business. He may be cunning enough to find some means of helping her."

Cheered by this faint hope, Fred busied himself in preparations for immediate departure. M'Buli had signified his willingness to start his men at once on another night march, and the Batatekes were already beginning to shoulder their loads of food and ammunition.

"We will find our way through the jungle by torches," explained Holden after a talk with M'Buli. "The chief says it only stretches a short distance, and then the trail runs through grass, where the moon

will give use plenty of light. You see, the Bololos have a clear twelve hours' start of us, and we have no time to lose."

"I thought they were afraid of lions?"

"They are," answered Holden simply. "But M'Buli is brave enough to risk his life to help us, and his men will go anywhere that he does."

"A bunch of good scouts!" cried Rushton heartily.

A few minutes later they started, proceeding at a walk through the difficult belt of jungle. Every fifth man carried a blazing torch of some resinous wood, giving forth an aromatic smoke that was rather agreeable, and Rushton found an augury of success in the fact that they had been lighted at the embers of the factory. It seemed to him that the very flames of the ruined building were leaping through the night in pursuit of the scoundrels that had caused its destruction.

In an hour or two the trees began to thin out and give place to scrubby underbrush, and that in turn disappeared as the trail reached the grass country. Here the torches were extinguished, to the muttered accompaniment of incantations against lions, and M'Buli broke into a sharp trot. The walk through the forest had helped to stretch Rushton's tired limbs, but for the first few miles he ran with clenched teeth until his sore and stiffened muscles had become limber. The reflection that they must be gaining on the Bololos did much to help him endure the pain, and he was sure they were gaining because M'Buli had pointed out that their enemy's advance would be considerably retarded by the litter.

The charms against the lions proved effective, though once the awe-inspiring roar of a beast close at hand sent a shiver of fear through every man in the line. Holden and Rushton discharged their guns several times in the direction of the sound, and the lion evidently decided to think twice about attacking a party that could obviously attack back.

The dawn came, and the sun rose before M'Buli lifted his spear as a signal to halt, and even the hardy blacks showed signs of fatigue. As for Holden and his young manager, they simply dropped in their

tracks and lay panting while the Batakeke cooks busied themselves with breakfast.

The chief had selected a sharp depression between two hills for their resting place. Through the center of the valley ran a cool stream of water whose banks were lined with shady trees, and beneath their sheltering branches the warriors threw themselves down in the long grass as though seeking fresh strength from contact with life-giving mother earth. M'Buli, ever cautious, ordered two of his men to post themselves on the farther hill and keep a sharp lookout. Fred happened to overhear these instructions, and was as much amused as impressed by them, for it seemed absurd to suppose that any harm could threaten a party of armed men over a hundred strong.

A minute later he had reason to change his views. The two scouts as they reached the top of the hill stopped abruptly and shouted back to their fellows. The words were lost upon Rushton, but the tone of their voices sent a quick thrill through his breast. He seized his rifle and dashed madly in their direction, firmly convinced that the men had sighted the Bololos, and to his utter amazement he was intercepted by M'Buli, who caught him roughly about the waist and swung him in the opposite direction.

"Zola-ku!" shouted the chief. "Run!"

Not another soul in the world could have induced Fred to obey such a command just when he believed that they had come up with Celia's captors, but he had learned to place great confidence in M'Buli's wisdom and level-headedness. When the chief shouted similar instructions to his men, who obeyed them instantly, the young American decided to do as he was told without argument, and he joined in the helter-skelter rush of the Batakeke warriors. Their weariness was forgotten as they tore off in the direction of the nearest hill, intent upon getting it between them and danger.

He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the two scouts hurl their spears at some unseen object before turning to seek safety in flight. They raced swiftly down the grassy slope of the hill toward the cover of the trees, but before half the distance had been passed, one of them pitched for-

ward, rolled head over heels, and lay still. He might have tripped over a stone from the manner of his fall, but the sharp crack of a rifle and a puff of white smoke from the crest of the hill behind him told a different story. The single report was followed by a volley of shots, and Rushton discerned a line of white-clad figures lying prone along the hilltop while a cloud of smoke drifted away from the muzzles of their guns. The second scout disappeared into the bush at the edge of the stream and apparently decided to stay there, for Fred saw him no more. A bullet sang past his own ear, causing him to duck instinctively, and before he could make any further observations his rush had carried him up the hill and over it. He flung himself down into safety on the sheltered side of its summit.

He looked about him for Holden, and saw the trader farther along the line of Batakekes just taking careful aim across the valley. It seemed a good example to follow, and Fred crept to a spot from which he could get a view of the opposite hilltop without unduly exposing himself. He saw a white figure moving along on the distant ridge, and aiming slightly in advance of it, he pulled his trigger. The man went sprawling, a patch of white against the brown grass, and moved no more.

Another target did not present itself, and Rushton, lowering his rifle, was seized with a curious and irritating feeling of helplessness. He did not know what was happening, he didn't know what to do next, and he was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of shame at having killed a fellow being for no definite reason—a qualm of conscience that vanished as he remembered his vision of the unfortunate scout pitching headlong down the slope.

A glance showed him that the Batakeke warriors were accepting the situation with the nonchalance of veterans. M'Buli had ordered them to keep out of sight for the time being, a command that they obeyed all the more cheerfully for the occasional hum of a bullet overhead. The chief had joined Holden, with whom he was talking earnestly, and presently they beckoned to Rushton. He wriggled backward down the

hill until he could walk upright with safety, and then hurried to their side.

The trader greeted him with a rueful smile.

"It appears that my sins have found me out," he said. "M'Buli seems positive that our peppery friends across the way are the main body of the Arab detachment that we drove off the day before yesterday. They evidently spotted our approach and laid a very neat little ambush for us. They'd have gotten all the revenge they want if M'Buli's scouts hadn't detected them."

Rushton mentally apologized for his amusement at the headman's precautions. He felt that the last half hour had permanently impressed upon him the virtue of unceasing watchfulness while traveling through the African bush.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"One of two things," replied the trader. "We can take to the tall grass and circle around the Arabs until we reach the trail again, or we can fight."

Fred looked at M'Buli and found that the chief was gazing at him intently—and hopefully.

"Let's give 'em hell!" said the young man briskly.

M'Buli's features wrinkled in a joyous grin that revealed his knowledge of at least one sound Anglo-Saxon idiom. He looked to Holden for approval and the trader nodded.

"No one could call me a religious fanatic," he said whimsically, "but I've always considered it a Christian duty to take a shot at a slaver. They are the curse of the continent, and every man's hand should be against them. In the present case I hate to give up the time from our own business, but perhaps it is only wise to teach these fellows a lesson rather than push on and leave them to threaten our rear."

They fell to a brief discussion of ways and means, while the Arabs kept up a desultory fire that wasted their ammunition and gained them nothing. The swarthy sons of the desert dared not risk a charge in the open, which would surely cost them dear, and it was evident that having failed in their surprise attack they were at a loss what to do next.

The simplest strategy is often the best, and M'Buli decided upon the time-honored device of a flank attack. Only fifteen of his men were armed with guns, and these were ordered to maintain a fire from their hill while their comrades made a wide detour that would bring them to the rear of the enemy. At a signal agreed upon, the riflemen would distract the Arabs' attention by a pretended charge while the larger force of Batateke warriors fell upon them from behind with spears and axes.

M'Buli took charge of the flanking party and invited Holden and Rushton to accompany him, so that there would be at least two rifles in the crowd.

The sun was getting well up in the sky by this time, and the perspiration poured from the bodies of the weary blacks as they followed the swift pace of their indomitable leader. They plunged after him into a trackless sea of grass that was more like young cane; it towered above their heads, cut their flesh, and tripped them at every step. Fred had never imagined such a stifling atmosphere as he now experienced, and in addition to the other discomforts he found it almost impossible to breathe as the dust from the grass worked its way into his throat and nose.

The sound of the guns grew indistinct as they swept well off to one side to make certain of remaining unseen, and when the firing grew loud once more, Fred welcomed the noise with relief as indicating the approaching end of their torturous journey. In a few minutes they had reached the trail again, and found themselves about a quarter of a mile in the rear of their unsuspecting foes. The Batateke warriors, at a gesture from M'Buli, spread out fanwise and crept stealthily forward.

Their tactics would probably have met with complete success had it not been for a curious bit of misfortune. One of the hang-ers-on of the Arab caravan, having no stomach for a fight, had prudently elected himself a rear guard of one. He lay down in the shade of a scrub palm, well back of the firing line, and remained there in drowsy contentment, refreshing himself from time to time with a long pull at a bottle of trade gin. He had just thrown his

head back for one of these delicious drafts when his eyes happened to fall upon a Batateke warrior cautiously advancing along the trail.

The man dropped his bottle and sprang to his feet with a yell of terror. Frightened out of his wits, he tore off in the direction of his friends instead of diving into the concealing bush, and before he had run ten yards a heavy spear caught him fair between the shoulders and sent him to his last accounting.

His shout of alarm had reached the Arabs, and a single glance showed them the charging horde of black warriors who now revealed themselves. At the same moment the riflemen on the opposite hill swept over its crest, firing as they ran, and came racing across the valley. The combined onslaught was too much for the low morale of the cowardly raiders; they correctly concluded that it was best "to run away and live to fight another day." The majority of them succeeded in reaching their ponies that were tethered near by, and galloped furiously into the grass brake, where pursuit was hopeless.

A dozen of them, however, found themselves ringed in by a band of Batateke, led by Holden, and hopelessly cut off from any chance of escape. An Arab slaver knows exactly what to expect if taken prisoner, and these men prepared to sell their lives dearly. They dropped to their knees in a circle, loading and firing their clumsy, old-fashioned weapons as fast as they could, but their aim was wild and the shooting ineffectual. A single rush of the Batatekes swept over them and passed on, leaving in its wake only a tangled pile of white-clad forms splashed with crimson.

Rushton, at one end of the Batateke line, had his hands full for a few minutes. He emptied his magazine as he charged at a group of Arabs, and before he could reload, he found himself locked in a passionate embrace with a burly ruffian of some nondescript nationality. The man was strong as an ox, and Fred had all he could do for a minute to keep him from reaching the revolver and knife that swung from his belt. Then the American resorted to a wrestling trick that he had learned in the

gym at college—score one for the advantages of the higher education!—and brought the man to earth with a crash that winded him. Before he could recover his breath, and before Fred could intervene, a Batateke warrior finished the ruffian with a spear thrust. The savage was rushing past them on his way to the main fracas, and he never checked his pace or faltered in his stride as he split the man's throat with the point of his weapon as neatly as a cavalry officer pins a tent peg with his lance.

Rushton, looking about him for new fields to conquer, found that the battle was ended.

His attention was caught by the sight of M'Buli, and a dozen of his men gathered in a circle and sorrowfully regarding something that lay on the ground at their feet. Fred hurried up to them, possessed by a premonition of evil, and a swift pang of fear shot to his heart as he recognized the figure of Holden lying in the stubby grass.

The trader was unconscious, and a slowly spreading patch of red above his right breast indicated the location of a severe wound. Rushton knelt beside him and carefully cut away the stained clothing until the ugly injury was exposed.

Holden had been shot in the last moment of the fighting as he led the Batateke rush that cut down the surrounded Arabs. Apparently the missile had come from a muzzle-loading musket, for as Fred raised him from the ground the slug dropped from his shirt and proved to be a triangular fragment of an iron kettle. It had entered the flesh between his shoulder and breast, and after plowing its way through his body had torn a gaping hole in his back.

They bore him gently to the shade of the nearest tree, and a native who had been dispatched for water came up with a full pail. Rushton bathed the wound and bandaged it, using the cleanest portion of his own shirt that he could find. When he had put a folded coat beneath the trader's head he had done all he could, and he straightened for a word with M'Buli.

"He must go home. He is not badly hurt, but he will be sick for a very long time. Savvy?"

The head man nodded his comprehension and gave orders at once for the construction

of a litter. Then he and Fred Rushton strolled away together in a gloomy silence that neither cared to break.

Fred mechanically drew his pipe from his pocket and commenced to fill it. His spirit was temporarily overwhelmed by this disastrous blow to the expedition, and his face revealed his depression. He was not aroused from his moody reflections until he felt M'Buli's black hand on his shoulder.

Rushton glanced at the friendly face of the native, who bared two flashing rows of white teeth in a smile of encouragement. The chief touched Fred's breast and then his own, and waved his hand westward, where lay the Pallaballa Mountains.

"You an' me!" he said. "We fellas good enough!"

A wave of fresh confidence swept through Rushton's body as he caught the chief's hand in a grip that hurt.

"M'Buli," he cried, "you're a brick!"

The words meant nothing to the Batakeke, but his smile grew even broader as he tenderly separated his aching fingers.

CHAPTER X.

THE CLAW OF A LEOPARD.

THE momentary light that flashed from Burk's eyes as he strode into her tent without warning would have been sufficient in itself to put Celia upon her guard, even if she had not already suspected the worst of her giant captor. All that was base in the man was revealed by that involuntary glance, which swept her from head to foot in an appraising fashion reminiscent of the slave market.

An instant later she might have thought herself mistaken, that she had only imagined the brief revelation of his real character. His twisted features took on an expression that upon a more normal face would have been one of delicate sympathy, and his cavalier manner, losing its tinge of mockery, became almost deferential.

"I've come to tell you some things you should know, Miss Celia," he announced solemnly.

He advanced toward her as he spoke, and the girl promptly backed away from him.

"Please don't be afraid of me. Sure, I'm the best fried you have in the world, Miss Celia."

Her lip curled.

"I'm not afraid of snakes," she retorted bitterly, "but I don't let them come near me."

He laughed, but winced, nevertheless.

"I only admire you the more when you talk like that," he assured her airily. "Give me a girl with spirit every time; 'tis no trick at all to break a jaded mare."

She listened with a grim tightening of her lips, her eyes holding his with a vigilant regard. Her hands were thrust with seeming carelessness into the side pockets of her shooting jacket, and the fingers of one were closed caressingly upon the butt of the ivory-handled revolver that constituted her sole defense. The feel of the weapon gave her confidence, for she knew that if the worst came to the worst she could kill this man as easily as she could place her foot upon a white ant and crush out its life; in her present frame of mind it did not matter to her that a second bullet must find its lodgment in her own brain if she would escape the swift vengeance of his companions. But meanwhile—

"If you are such a good friend of mine," she said in a low, hard voice, "perhaps you will tell me the meaning of all this. Where is my mother?"

"She is with the saints, Miss Celia, where her spirit is at rest."

Her heart contracted and a cry of pain was wrung from her trembling lips. His words only confirmed her fears, but the blow was still a heavy one. She sank dejectedly upon one end of the pile of blankets that comprised her bed, temporarily off her guard and heedless of the man's menacing presence. In that moment she was at his mercy, and he knew it, but he was in no mood to take advantage of her stricken senses. His cunning brain had devised a network of falsehood for her trapping, and he had no desire to gain his ends by brute force if he could master her by lies. He seated himself quietly upon the other end of the roll of blankets, the very picture of sorrow and contrition.

"I'd best make a clean tale of the whole

business," he said, regarding her shrewdly from the corner of his eyes, "and then you will know all that is bad about me and some that is good.

"I'm a bit of a rough lad, but the blame for that is not all my own. I never knew my parents, and I grew up in the streets of London with never a soul to teach me right from wrong. Small good I got from that, and it was an ill training I brought to this country ten years ago. You know what Africa is, Miss Celia, and you'll know what I mean when I say that I found more to tempt me than I could resist. Faith, the devil knew what he was about when he brought the temptations of Africa to the blessed Saint Anthony!

"Still, I might have kept straight if I'd not met with bad company on the Rand. There I was accused of a crime that another man committed, and though they couldn't convict me, the suspicion turned every man's hand against me."

He paused to search for some sign that he might be arousing her interest. He was scarcely doing that, but as the minutes passed Celia was gradually forcing her mind from the contemplation of her mother's fate to the consideration of her own plight. An occasional shudder was the only outward sign of life that she gave.

"I drifted along the coast, even as far as Cairo, but the bad name I'd been given stuck to me like a brother.

"It was there, in the north, that I met a scoundrelly Boer named Smale, as rare an omadawn as ever dirtied the earth—and the villain did me more than one good turn. Finally we pulled off a trick on a rascally Jew, the proceeds of which will set me up for life if ever they reach the eye of a Parisian jeweler." He burrowed in his shirt and drew forth the little buckskin sack that lay always next to his breast.

"Look at these!" he commanded.

She obeyed indifferently, glancing stupidly at first at the dull objects that he was shaking into his palm. As their significance slowly penetrated to her confused brain she caught her breath with a gasp of sheer astonishment, and her eyes opened wide as they stared at the amazing size of the stones. He sensed her emotion and a smile

flickered about his lips. Satisfied that he had aroused her interest, if not her cupidity, he forbore to press his advantage, but as he carefully restored his treasure to its accustomed place he was mistakenly convinced that Celia Holden was just as mercenary as every one of her sex whom he had known intimately.

"We came south to Mafadi," he continued, "leaving a hard trail for any one who might follow, and intending to strike down the Congo to the west coast. But that devil of a Smale got wind of your father's gold and the place it came from, and nothing would satisfy him but we should make a try for it. I'd be hard put to it now to say whether I'm sorry or glad that I listened to him. I'm sorry enough and to spare for the trouble it has brought to you, Miss Celia, but I'm glad for another reason. It led to my meeting with the only woman I've ever loved, even if she did introduce herself with a bullet that clipped the lobe from me ear!"

He accompanied his declaration of passion with a smile that was meant to be winning, but it was lost on the startled girl. She flushed with quick anger and turned upon him a gaze of withering contempt.

"How dare you talk like that? How dare you tell me in one breath that you have killed my mother, and in the next that you love me? I didn't know that such a fiend existed out of hell!"

"I can't help loving you," he replied, unmoved by her fierce denunciation, "and I didn't kill your mother. She fired the factory with her own hand, and died before ever we knew she was in the building. But that's getting ahead of the story, Miss Celia, and you'd better learn at once how serious your position is. I've worse news to tell you."

"My—father?" breathed the girl.

He nodded soberly. "It was a Bololo that did it," he said simply.

No artist of the stage could have told the lie, and acted it, with a more convincing air. It seemed to him the next moment that the girl's body collapsed upon itself as though every fiber of her being was turned to water. Her face sank into her hands and a moan of anguish parted her

lips. The graceless ruffian sat in a silence that pretended to be sympathetic, and for five minutes no sound was heard in the tent except the choking sobs of the girl. Then she managed to regain her self-control, the life-long training she had received in the hard school of Africa enabling her to meet with some courage a blow that might have crushed a weaker woman. She raised her tear-stained face.

"Tell me!" she commanded.

"Smale suggested that we go to the Bololos and persuade them to help us get the Batakele gold. We went to Gama, and everything was going smoothly until your father attacked us with a war party of savages. By that time I had seen you, and I would have given my right arm to save your father's life, but these devilish Bololos got out of hand and I was powerless to check them. There was some desperate fighting, but the Batakeles were outnumbered and never had a chance. When it was over they told me that your father had fought bravely to the last."

"There was another white man with him," said Celia, her heart torn by a fresh fear. "What became of him?"

"Oh, he got away!" answered Burk blandly. "The fastest Bololo couldn't catch him."

The girl straightened with a quick intake of her breath.

"Do you mean he—*ran*?"

"Like an ostrich!" said Burk with relish.

Celia Holden averted her face so that he should not see the sudden light that showed in her eyes. She was no fool, and in that instant her woman's intuition divined the liar. Burk had gone too far!

She realized then, if she never had before, that she loved Fred Rushton and trusted him. She knew with tremendous certainty that his courage was beyond question and that he never could have been guilty of the cowardice with which this man charged him. On the heels of this reflection a great hope stirred her breast that if Burke's story was false in one particular it might be false in all!

He, on the contrary, was amazingly well pleased with the narrative he was concocting. He continued calmly.

"Nothing would satisfy the Bololos but to follow up their success with an attack on your father's factory on their way to the Pallaballa Mountains. I couldn't stop them, so I came along to make sure that no injury happened to you. I never thought you would put up such a stiff fight, much less that your mother would fire the factory with such a splendid and reckless spirit. When we finally rushed the building and I shot the revolver from your hand, it was to save you from death, or worse, at the hands of these blacks. I carried you from the burning house and then saved you from their vengeance in the only way possible—by claiming you for my own and swearing to protect you with my life."

This Celia knew to be a lie, since she had only feigned unconsciousness while Burk was directing her removal from the factory. Her heart leaped at this additional indication that he was not telling her the whole truth.

She faced him coolly.

"And what do you propose to do now?" she demanded abruptly.

"You're an honest woman," he responded slowly, "and I'm an honest man—between times. What else should I do but offer you the heart and hand and name of Dan Burk? I tell you again that you are safe from these Bololos only while you are under my protection. But once we reach the Pallaballa Mountains and find the gold, the devil himself can't say what his children will do. Lombo will be through with us then, and I've got a pretty good idea of what Lombo does with people that he's through with. As for you—well, there's an Arab slaver cruises about these parts and he'd pay a fancy price to Lombo for a young white woman!"

"I have no mind to fight off this whole crowd single-handed, or even with the help of Piet Smale, with your liberty hanging in the balance as well as my own life." He paused thoughtfully.

"Then what is your idea?"

"That you and I slip out of camp tomorrow night. We'll be near the Congo then, and if we can reach it we will put fifty miles of it between us and Lombo before dawn. But you must remember that

I'm a marked man and that as soon as we reach civilization you will hold my life in the hollow of your pretty hand. Yet there are only two things I want from you before I take the chance, from which you may see how much I trust you. I want your promise to say no bad word about me, and your promise to say the best word of all before the first priest we meet. Pledge me your honor to those two things and I'll get you out of this country where no man or woman is safe." His voice grew softly caressing. "Will you come with me on those terms, Celia, me darling?"

It has been mentioned that Celia Holden was fearless. She might have played for time, she might even have adventured on the perilous trip he proposed, trusting to her spirit and resource to overcome his greater physical strength, but she chose instead the bolder, more reckless part. She cast pretense to the winds and blazed forth at him in a passion of hatred and contempt.

"You beastly, murdering brute! Do you think you have deceived me with your lies? Don't you know that I'd rather trust myself a hundred times over to these blacks than to a thieving white renegade who associates with them? Liar! If you really plan to leave this party to-morrow night it isn't because you are afraid of Lombo, but because you are afraid of the two honest white men that you know are on your trail. You know they will hunt you to your hole! No matter what happens to *me*, they will surely catch *you*, and they will treat you like the sneaking, yellow cur that you are!"

He leaped to his feet, furious, as she stopped to draw breath. His face was terrible to look at while it became the screen upon which were pictured the violent passions that were mastering him. The scar that crossed his evil visage showed livid against the purple flush of bitter anger and still more bitter shame.

She shrank away from him, convinced that the final test of strength had come. In another second, she thought, his rushing bulk would match itself against an ounce of lead.

"You little fool!" he gasped. "I've offered you marriage and you've refused; now

you'll take what I choose to give you, and be damned to you!"

"Spoken like a real gutter-snipe!" she sneered. If it came to a fight her chances would be all the better if his wits were confused and his caution dissipated by uncontrollable anger. She set herself to taunt him relentlessly, and he snarled back at her in kind.

"Nix on the rough stuff, Dan!"

Burk and the girl, rooted in their tracks, stared at each other for one moment of sheer astonishment. Then they both turned toward the entrance of the tent and beheld the figure of Smale standing in the opening, the raised flap still held in his hand.

Burk was the first to recover himself.

"Who asked *you* to this party?" he shouted truculently.

Smale regarded him serenely. He stood silently in his place, his attitude passive but compelling. In that second the wills of the two men met and clashed, but the Irishman's volatile temperament was no match for the phlegmatic strength of the Boer. He gave a short laugh.

"What do you want, little man?" he asked.

"A few words in your pretty ear," answered Smale, and grinned slowly. His glance shifted to Celia, who was watching the scene with hopeful eyes. "You can tell the young lady from me that while she is with us she'll be treated like one of the family!"

The big Irishman shrugged his shoulders.

"Faith, it was the same thing I was just telling her on me own account," he grumbled half humorously. "It seemed to upset her!"

Abruptly he turned on his heel and strode out into the night. Smale followed him quietly, pausing to duck his head in friendly farewell to the astonished girl.

She was left staring at the blank wall of the tent as the flap dropped behind him, and presently she sank exhausted upon the blankets of her bed. Her body had finally succumbed to the nervous reaction from the strain under which she had been laboring, and for a moment her mind was shut to all impressions from without.

Then a sound gradually obtruded itself

upon her stupefied senses. Small but insistent, like the scratching of the tiniest of mice, it continued to play upon her ears until her full attention was attracted. She traced the sound to the rear of her tent, where something was scraping at the canvas, and after a brief hesitation she crept cautiously toward it.

Very carefully she raised the edge of the canvas, and immediately a black arm, with its fingers clenched, was thrust into the tent. It placed something at her feet and was swiftly withdrawn. She uttered a soft cry, and her heart beat faster with new hope as she stooped and recovered the curved claw of a leopard!

CHAPTER XI.

THE LEOPARD SNARLS.

C'WAYO, for it was he, slipped quietly away from the tent after giving Celia the token of encouragement. He moved swiftly through the shadows in the direction taken by the white men, gliding along as soundlessly as a leopard, until he came as close as he dared to the fire by which they sat talking. He lay behind a bush and strained his eyes and ears to their utmost. By catching an occasional word that he could understand, and by watching the changing expression of their faces, he was able to follow their conversation with some degree of success.

"Why did you interrupt my little tête-à-tête?" inquired the big Irishman plaintively.

"Somebody always has to keep you from playing the giddy ox," retorted Smale, "and usually it's me. Ain't you got brains enough to savvy that we're sitting into a pretty tight game, and that Celia Holden is the best ace we've got up our sleeve?"

"You mean as a hostage?"

"Just that. There is a pair on our trail that will follow us like bloodhounds, but they won't dare attack us while we have the girl in our hands. We'll always have one trump left as long as we've got a knife at her throat. They'll have to stand by while we vamose with the gold—and then we can think about giving her up! I guess we'll do it if we know what's good for us,

but if you act the fool and harm her we'll be in for the worst fight of our lives."

Burk grunted discontentedly. He flung another log on the fire and watched the sparks dance merrily upward into the velvety blackness. The light from the blaze grew more brilliant as the dry wood burst into flame.

"But I like the girl!" he complained.

"That's how the trouble usually starts," observed the Boer morosely. "Think twice, Dan, while the thinking's good. You have done pretty well in this affair; you can start a bank with the gold or a jewelry shop with the diamonds. What more can a sensible man want?"

Burk's hand reached into his bosom for the second time that evening and drew out the buckskin bag. He did not venture to open it, but he held it up before his eyes and patted it affectionately.

"Diamonds!" he exclaimed, his voice shaking with eagerness. "A king's ransom in diamonds!"

"Put 'em away," cautioned Smale sourly.

Burk obeyed, then stretched his long limbs with a prodigious yawn. "Lord, what a life!" he said thoughtfully. "You're right about the girl—blast you! I'll leave her alone for the present, anyway. And now I can do with a bit of sleep."

The two men rose and sought their blankets, passing within five feet of the spot where C'Wayo was stretched, a shadow among shadows. Burk hummed a tune as he went, and linked his arm in Smale's for all the world as though no difference of opinion had ever come between them. The big man, like all of his race, was capable of swift changes from hot to cold, from anger to good-fellowship.

Nevertheless, the shrewd C'Wayo had seen enough to convince him of one important thing: the Boer's nature was the stronger, and his the dominant will. Moreover, the witch doctor carried away with him the vision of a small bag and the memory of the musical word "diamonds."

There were plot and counterplot afoot that night in the camp of the Bololos.

While the two white adventurers were discussing their hopes and plans for the future, the crafty Lombo was wide awake

and getting certain projects of his own in train.

For some years the Bololo headman, in exchange for liquor, guns, contraband of all sorts, and above everything, in exchange for immunity from raids, had carried on a thriving business with a band of Arab slave dealers, whose chief was the notorious Sheik El Rassan, as wily and unscrupulous a rascal as lived in the whole of Africa.

The Arab slaver frequently accompanied his caravans on their nefarious errands. They wove their mysterious way through the fastnesses of the dense jungle and the dry stretches of grass land by trails whose existence was barely guessed at by the somnolent authorities. At times they turned aside and plunged still deeper from sight to avoid a district whose commandant was known to be an honest man; at times they paraded boldly through sections where the authorities were agreeably open to reason—when it chinked.

Not one in ten of these expeditions returned to its desert home without a long string of wretched captives and a substantial store of ivory, gold, and caoutchouc, and the area beneath the sway of Lombo and his doughty warriors had long been a particularly fertile field for their activities. Twice a year that precious scoundrel turned over to the sheik the accumulation of prisoners and loot that had accrued to him by taxes or as a result of the ceaseless tribal warfare in which he engaged.

On his present trip, however, El Rassan had found Lombo missing from Gama, the town itself deserted, and learned with righteous indignation that there was small prospect of his receiving any spoils from the absent headman.

He was still fuming over this irritating blow to his hopes when one of his scouting parties returned with the tale of a skirmish on the shore of Lake Bwalo and the loss of a fine string of captives. The sheik was properly enraged, and even the out-of-hand killing of the leader of the minor expedition did not entirely pacify the disappointed Arab. He sent off several swift runners with instructions to find Lombo, wherever he might be, and demand from him some account of his movements and what chance

there was of his producing any treasure, human or otherwise.

One of these messengers had succeeded in his quest and overtaken the Bololo party in its first camp after the sack of the Holden factory. It was dark before he arrived and his palaver with Lombo occupied several hours, so by the time they had finished talking every one else was sound asleep. Nevertheless, he decided to start upon his return trip at once, for he could travel by the light of the moon, and his promptness might gain him favor in the eyes of his employer. Also, while the brooding African night had its terrors for a helpless black boy, there was still more to be feared from the wrath of El Rassan if he suspected his messenger of sloth.

The boy had left the camp a quarter of a mile behind him and was running easily, with his head thrown back and his elbows pressed close to his sides, when he was brought to a sudden halt by a noise that sent a deathlike chill to the marrow of his bones. It was the angry, menacing snarl of a leopard, somewhere close at hand.

He stood frozen in his tracks, straining his ears for the faintest sound that might indicate the exact point from which the danger threatened. He heard nothing, but almost before he realized what was happening one of the shadows by the side of the trail resolved itself into the figure of a man, who stepped into plain view in the moonlight.

One glance was enough for the frightened messenger. He had a momentary glimpse of a feathered headpiece, of a wiry, black form with a leopard skin about its loins, and he dropped to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

"Minga, M'Buta!" he cried. "Greeting, great fetish man!"

"Minga!" answered C'Wayo shortly. "Rise! No harm will befall you."

The runner regained his feet, but glanced about him fearfully.

"You heard, M'Buta? The snarl of a leopard—"

"It was my spirit that cried from his lair. He will not hurt you except at my command."

Even this amiable assurance did not put

the messenger entirely at his ease. He kept one eye upon C'Wayo while the other nervously searched the underbrush that hedged the trail.

"Whence come you?" demanded C'Wayo, who knew the answer perfectly well, but was curious to test the man's truthfulness. He spoke in Bantu, the language familiar to most Congolese, and the runner replied in the same dialect.

"My master is El Rassan, the Arab, and I come now from Lombo, the chief of the Bololos, to whom I had been sent."

"What was your business with Lombo?"

The man hesitated, his heart sinking within him as he realized the difficult position in which he found himself. To attempt to deceive an *nganga*, a wizard, who would certainly detect the deception and punish it in some unimaginably atrocious manner, was not a pleasant prospect. On the other hand, to tell him the truth might be equally dangerous if he chanced to be opposed, on general principles, to the traffic in human flesh. The messenger racked his brains for a way out of this dilemma, but before anything suggested itself to his confused wits he was almost startled from his remaining senses by a repetition of the leopard's angry snarl. This time it was scarcely ten paces to the right of him, and his knees bent beneath him.

"He grows impatient," explained C'Wayo softly.

"Mercy, M'Buta! Ask him to forgive me, and I will tell all!"

C'Wayo turned his head and obligingly spoke some words that were quite unintelligible to his terror-stricken companion. Apparently they were satisfactory to his "spirit," for they were received with a deep, rumbling purr of approval that fluttered the still night air. If it were ventriloquism, it was superbly done.

"I went to Lombo," admitted the runner in a voice that quavered, "with a demand from El Rassan for gold and ivory and captives."

"And the answer?"

"The Bololos have been unlucky and have nothing to give."

C'Wayo's grim features took on a thoughtful expression.

"Ah! That will be bad news for your master."

"He will rage, M'Buta. Already he is low in his spirit, for the other day one of his parties was beaten by a band of Bata-teke warriors and a chain of valuable prisoners turned loose. El Rassan counted upon Lombo to repair this misfortune, and when he hears my message the whole earth will tremble at his wrath."

C'Wayo's stern face relaxed and grew suddenly bland and benign.

"He will be still more angry when you tell him that Lombo has lied to you! You will explain this to El Rassan, and he will reward you well for your information."

"M'Buta—I do not understand. Your servant is stupid."

"Of course you are stupid," said C'Wayo sympathetically. "But listen to me, who know all things, and you will receive understanding. Mark my words carefully! Lombo has many captives in the camp you have just left, but he concealed them from you and is planning to dispose of them to another dealer. He is wearied of El Rassan, and has been heard to say he is but an empty wind bag that is ready to burst at the prick of a Bololo spear; he has also remarked that the men who serve El Rassan are lower than the hyenas who gather about a bit of carrion."

A grunt of astonishment and anger was wrung from the messenger, who almost forgot his fears in his indignation.

"It will be a bad day for Lombo when my master hears this! I have seen him kill a friend for a lighter word spoken in jest."

"We must remember that it is often the bearer of bitter news who is the first object of wrath," mused C'Wayo. He thought a moment and added considerately: "I must give you some good tidings with the bad, so that you will be rewarded for serving me. Tell El Rassan that Lombo is marching toward the Pallaballa Mountains in order to secure a store of gold that is hidden there. He has with him two white men, one of whom has a map showing the spot where the treasure lies. Lombo has only fifty warriors in his party, and they are badly armed. You will be sure to make that clear to El Rassan!"

"That is, indeed, good news, M'Buta. And if he rewards me, what must I do for you?"

C'Wayo uttered a short, scornful laugh.

"Pardon, M'Buta! Truly, it is not for such as I to do more than serve you humbly."

"See to it only that you bear my message correctly—and *fast!*"

"Yes, master."

"On second thought, I will send one at your heels who will make sure that they do not touch the ground." With this grim promise, C'Wayo again turned his head and spoke into the darkness. "Do you hear, my well-beloved?"

A gentle mew of acknowledgment answered him, and the messenger fell to his knees in a frenzy of fear.

"Spare me, M'Buta, or my heart will fail!"

"Peace, fool! While you do my bidding faithfully he will protect you, not hurt you." He moved to one side and pointed along the moonlit trail. "Go!" he commanded.

The man rose shakily to his feet, gave C'Wayo as wide a berth as possible, and flew away on his interrupted journey. It was fortunate for him that his lungs were sound, for a man runs fast with the devil at his heels. He ever afterward swore that the *pad-pad-pad* of velvety paws kept pace with him through the night; as he grew older and told the tale with more practised ease he used to describe how at sunrise he had ventured to steal a glance over his shoulder in the hope of seeing his unwelcome escort, and he solemnly averred that, though the soft thud of paws continued, there was no living creature to be seen. Which last was probably true.

The indefatigable C'Wayo had not yet finished his evening's work. He retraced his steps in the direction of the sleeping Bololo camp, his thoughts busy as he went with pleasant dreams of the future. He was quite confident that events would presently march in obedience to his deft guidance.

He had his own reasons for detesting the slave traffic, reasons that had been instilled into his being even as he lay at his mother's

breast, and he had been given an opportunity this evening to launch a shrewd blow at the most notorious slaver in all the Congo. He had underestimated the number of Lombo's men with intent to encourage El Rassan to attack his erstwhile friend; he had planted the seeds of enmity by putting scurrilous remarks into Lombo's mouth; and he had finally baited the trap with a tale of gold and prisoners, two of the most attractive lures that he could possibly dangle before the covetous Arab.

Moreover, he had done an excellent turn for M'Buli, whom he liked and who also hated slave dealers. He had brought to the point of hostility two of that chief's most inveterate enemies. If the result of his simple stratagem brought about a pitched battle between the forces of Lombo and El Rassan, it would be an easy matter for the hard-fighting Batatekes to fall upon the decimated victors and annihilate them. He smiled as he strode along.

In addition to these dark motives that had actuated his efforts there was yet another which did credit to his better nature. He owed a debt to Celia Holden that he was anxious to repay; it still made him shiver and writhe to think how narrowly she had saved his back from the terrible lacerations of a military flogging. He must bend all his energies to helping her, and since he could not, even with all his mystic powers, overcome two white men and over a hundred Bololos single-handed, the next best thing was to embroil the girl's enemies in a general scrimmage from which he might snatch her unnoticed.

These thoughts brought him nearly to his goal, and his movements grew more stealthy as he approached the Bololo camp and cautiously made his way toward the spot where Celia Holden's tent gleamed white. To his relief, the pale light of her lantern still shone through the canvas.

He worked around to the rear of the tent and scratched upon the cloth as he had done before. Then he thrust his sinewy arm beneath the bottom of the canvas, and presently felt his fingers taken in a soft grip.

"C'Wayo?" whispered the girl.

"Yes, missy. No safe for talk. Write. You write Massa Fred. I take um."

"Tell me, are my mother and father alive?"

"Yes, missy. Um lib for Mafadi. No talk more!"

Celia, relieved of her worst fears, cheerfully set about writing a note. She wondered why C'Wayo had stipulated that Fred should be her correspondent instead of her father, but wasted no time in arguing the point. She cast around for writing materials, for she had neither pen nor pencil, and finally hit upon a scheme. She ejected one of the cartridges from her revolver, found a sheet of paper, and scrawled a few words with the soft leaden nose of the bullet. The note was necessarily short and to the point.

"Safe. Armed. Come quick." There she hesitated, smiled a little, and scribbled a hieroglyphic that perhaps only a lover could have deciphered as "love." She signed the missive "C. H." folded it, and marked the outside, "F. R."

She pushed the note beneath the tent and felt it taken from her hand. Then a low voice whispered, "No fear, missy. C'Wayo always here!"

She waited a little while for any further sign or sound, but nothing rewarded her patience. Finally her heart lightened of its heaviest burden, she extinguished her lantern, threw herself upon her blankets, and was asleep almost immediately.

C'Wayo crept away cautiously until assured that he was safe, when he slipped along more rapidly. He plunged into the jungle, where the rays of the moon could not penetrate, but his step was as sure and his pace as swift as though he possessed the feline quality of vision in the dark.

He had gone half a mile before he considered it safe to make his preparations for the final task that remained on his program for this busy night.

In a tiny clearing that suited him he kindled a small fire of dry twigs and leaves. Upon this he cast a number of blades of sweet-smelling grass that he plucked in the vicinity, and when the fire was burning nicely he tossed into the heart of the flames a pinch of greasy powder that he drew from the pouch at his waist.

An oily smoke ascended from the blaze,

and into its choking fumes he thrust his head, inhaling them deeply.

After a moment he withdrew, gasping, flung himself flat upon his back, and closed his eyes. His form grew rigid. His breathing ceased. To all appearances he lay there dead.

CHAPTER XII.

DREAM TOURS.

HOLDEN, suffering agonies from his wound, recovered consciousness as he was lifted into the litter prepared for his return to Mafadi, but a high fever made it difficult for him to talk coherently with Rushton. He could only urge the young man to take every precaution for his own safety, to follow the advice of M'Buli in matters relating to the handling of the Batateke warriors—and to stay upon the trail of the Bolodos until Celia was rescued and revenged. The trader's eyes snapped with their old fire as he emphasized this final command, and he seemed relieved by the fervor with which Fred swore to obey it. Then the bearers shouldered their burden, and Rushton was left alone to face the greatest responsibility of his life.

In spite of the rapidity with which everything had happened, it was nearly four o'clock when Fred waved his hand in a last farewell to the wounded trader. He hardly dared to believe that the Batateke chief would exact further efforts from his men that day, but he reckoned without the tough endurance of the African savage. M'Buli was mindful of the fact that two hours of light remained, and that it was a good period of the day in which to travel. He marshaled his men, who had snatched a brief nap while their leaders solved problems of their own, and led off at his easy, swinging gait that fairly ate up the distance. Twelve miles had been covered before they halted for the night.

Fred was too weary to say more than a few words of congratulation to M'Buli on the progress they had made. Then he swallowed a small quantity of food and was asleep almost before he could wrap himself in his blankets.

In spite of his exhaustion, or perhaps because of it, his slumbers were broken, and sometime during the night his brain was visited by an extraordinarily vivid dream.

There appeared before him the figure of an old, wiry, exceptionally ugly savage who was grotesquely attired. His head was adorned by a remarkable structure of beads and bright feathers, his loins were wrapped about with an ancient leopard skin considerably the worse for wear, and the balance of his raiment consisted of innumerable strings of shells and beads that hung from his neck. This apparition beckoned to the sleeper with a gesture of treachery, and Rushton, in his dream, was seized with a conviction that it was vitally important for him to get up and follow whither the figure should lead. He strove desperately to rise from his bed, but he was held motionless by invisible bonds, whose nature he could not determine. The phantom appeared to watch his efforts patiently, and shook its head with disappointment when the young man failed to stir. At last it seemed to give a nod of understanding, raised its arms above its head, and slowly ascended into the air until it vanished from sight. Fred stirred restlessly in his blankets, then sank into the grateful oblivion of dreamless sleep.

He awakened to the cheerful bustle of breakfast preparations, and immediately sought M'Buli for a conference on their plans.

He found the headman sitting alone at some little distance from the camp, his back against a tree and his legs stuck straight before him. He was lost in deep thought, and was taking no interest at all in the activities of his cook, a singular fact, indeed. Rushton, as he drew near, noticed with some uneasiness that the chief wore the expression of one who has passed through a disagreeable experience.

"Are you sick, M'Buli?" he asked.

The African shook his head, but without much conviction.

"Me lib for see spirit," he explained glumly. "Big spirit who hab spik for you."

Rushton pondered this until he arrived at a doubtful conception of its meaning.

"You saw a spirit who had a message for me?" he inquired.

"Yes, massa. Him spirit of C'Wayo. C'Wayo Ngo."

"You've been dreaming, M'Buli," declared Fred promptly.

The chief accepted the diagnosis without enthusiasm.

"C'Wayo come for me," he announced firmly. "Me go far-far. Fast, like him big wind."

The words stirred a memory in Rushton's mind, and of a sudden he came upon a sharp recollection of his own dream. Despite his ample fund of "common sense," the coincidence gave him a queer, unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. Was this more magic?

He had come to Africa equipped with the innate hesitancy of the white race to accept as true anything that it cannot understand, and it was only lately that the dark mystery of the strange continent and its stranger peoples had begun to make any impression upon his mind. He had ridiculed a hundred curious stories, but their cumulative testimony had insensibly affected his imagination and swayed his belief in the soundness of his own judgment.

His next question, and his willingness even to discuss such things with an ignorant native, were sound evidence that his armor of skepticism had been pierced and that his mind was now in the healthier state of being open to instruction.

"Tell me, M'Buli, what does this C'Wayo look like?"

The headman entered upon a halting description of the fetish man's personal appearance. Fred grew more and more uncomfortable as one detail after another coincided with the picture that he had in his own brain, and he began to feel the unpleasant sensations of a little child listening to ghost stories in the dark. The spell of the uncanny was upon him, though he was not quite ready to surrender.

"You've been dreaming," he repeated stubbornly as the other ended his stammering description. "How could C'Wayo take you anywhere?"

"No savvy. Him make big juju."

"Where do you think you went?"

"To Bololo camp," answered M'Buli positively.

In response to many questions, and by the aid of much broken English and badly damaged Bantu, and illustrated by gestures and even rough sketches, M'Buli managed to tell a tale of his night's experience that filled Rushton's soul with amazement.

According to his account C'Wayo had appeared to the chief and "drawn his spirit from his body," as he expressed it. The two of them had then rushed through the air for endless miles, the earth invisible and the moon and stars terrifying close, until M'Buli was suddenly aware that he was standing on the outskirts of an encampment. By the light of many fires he could distinguish the bodies of sleeping men, and when he recognized them to be Boilos he was even more frightened than during his trip through the boundless reaches of space.

Within a few feet of him an alert sentry stood leaning on his spear, and M'Buli was greatly relieved to discover that the man could not see them; on the other hand, he was correspondingly annoyed to find himself quite powerless to kill or injure the unsuspecting savage, which was the headman's first coherent idea.

C'Wayo led him through the files of sleeping men, of whom he counted one hundred and twenty-seven. Off to one side, by a small fire of their own, lay two men wrapped in blankets. One of the figures was very large, the other short, but broad, and though their faces were concealed M'Buli was positive that they smelled like white men.

The next thing he remembered was following C'Wayo toward a tent that stood near the edge of the camp. They walked boldly past the man who watched its entrance, and apparently passed through the canvas walls without troubling to raise the flap. M'Buli found himself looking down at the recumbent form of a sleeping woman.

"It was Massa Holden's little mammy," he declared.

"What?" Fred exclaimed. "Do you mean you saw Missy Celia?"

"Yes." M'Buli's assertion was positive. "She sleep. In she hand she hab dem small lightnin' gun dat spik quick-quic."

"A revolver?" hazarded Fred.

"Yes," nodded M'Buli. He seemed to

search his memory for another detail, and in a moment his face cleared. He reached forward and tapped the butt of the heavy revolver that Rushton wore at his waist. "Him all same elephant scrivello."

Rushton started. It happened that he had recently purchased in Mafadi a small revolver with a finely modeled butt of ivory, and he had given the weapon to Celia on the occasion of her birthday, only a week before the outbreak of this present trouble. He was quite sure that she had kept it in her room, and quite certain that M'Buli could never have seen it. There was the chance, of course, that some servant had noticed it and described it to the headman, but the chances against such an improbability were a thousand to one.

The young man found himself confronted with the apparent fact that M'Buli had visualized Celia, in a dream, and had discovered her in possession of a revolver that complied with the description of one he had never seen. It was too much for Fred. Mentally, he threw up this hands and confessed himself in the presence of the inexplicable.

"Go on," he urged in a stifled voice. "What happened next?"

M'Buli could add only one more detail to his astounding narrative. It concerned a command that C'Wayo had given him for the young man, bidding him look for a message "in the eye of the white elephant."

"What in the world does that mean?" demanded the mystified Rushton. "'Eye of a white elephant!' Why, it's not once in ten years that a white elephant is seen in these parts—and how could I get a message from its eye? More likely to get one from its tusks if I tried!"

"No savvy," answered M'Buli gravely. He added with emphasis that his words were the words of C'Wayo, and that the fetish doctor could not possibly have been talking nonsense.

"Did Missy Celia look well?"

Fred was almost ashamed to put the question, suggesting as it did that he was beginning to credit the incredible. Nevertheless, his heart was greatly lightened by M'Buli's assurance that, so far as he could see, the young woman was well.

The arrival of breakfast interrupted any further conversation in the matter, since it brought with it a number of the older warriors who engaged their chief in long and weighty discussions.

Fred routed out a pencil and paper and settled himself to scribble a short note to Holden, to be sent back by a runner. He told the trader of their progress to date, reported himself and every one well—and came to a pause on the question of whether or not to relate the headman's curious dream. M'Buli's belief in the actuality of the adventure had been contagious while Fred was with him, but now the American's temporary credulity was fading away. Still, he knew that Holden was inclined to believe in such things, and it might cheer him to ponder M'Buli's statement that the girl was safe and well; with a feeling of irritation for which he could not account, he added a few lines and told the trader of the occurrence, wondering if some day the old man would laugh at him for a fool.

The Batateke chief rather reluctantly acceded to his request for a messenger. He reminded the young man that they would need every one of the warriors in the event of their overtaking the Bololos, whose number he now knew exactly by the manifestation of C'Wayo's peculiar powers. However, having relieved himself of this mild remonstrance, M'Buli good-naturedly selected the swiftest of his runners and bade him rejoin the expedition as rapidly as possible after delivering the note in Mafadi.

With no further delay the headman lifted his spear in the familiar signal to his men, and they were once more speeding along on the trail of their enemies.

It was nearing the middle of the day, and they were running in the welcome shade of a stretch of jungle, when M'Buli suddenly uttered a soft ejaculation. He checked the advance of the straggling file, and calling Rushton to his side he pointed out the remains of several camp fires and innumerable other signs that betokened the recent presence of a large body of men.

"Him Bololos," he announced.

He strode quickly to the nearest heap of ashes and thrust his hand into its heart. He stood up again, smiling, and invited

Fred to try for himself; he obeyed, and his pulses quickened as he felt that the ash was still warm. He, too, smiled.

"When were they here?" he asked.

"When him sun come." The chief took an observation overhead and held up six fingers.

Six hours ago! The news acted upon Fred like a powerful restorative, and he was ready to set off again without another moment's delay. But the Batateke headman was not to be rushed into doing anything so foolhardy. He knew the ability of his men and he knew their limitations; he felt certain that the movements of the Bololos must be greatly hampered by the burden of a white woman in a litter, and believed that he could easily overtake them in another twelve hours if he chose to press the pace. But to attack a war party of superior strength with a hand of tired men would be suicidal. He shook his head at Fred's eagerness, and ordered his men to rest.

The chief signed to the young man to follow him and led the way without hesitation to a group of trees that grew near the edge of the encampment. There was a small clearing in their midst, and to this he pointed in triumph.

"Here him tent!" he said.

Rushton examined the place carefully. Sure enough, the marks of tent pegs were plain to be seen, and a fragment of a guy rope, hastily severed by a knife, lay in full view upon the grass.

Unless there were really some truth in his account of his spirit journey during the night how had M'Buli known exactly where to look for the location of the tent? Fred gave up the puzzle in despair.

He was left to himself after that, and in spite of his physical fatigue his restless mind was not content to let him lie down. He wandered here and there about the place, admiring the richness of the tropical growths that in this spot had not been touched by man. Birds of vivid color, a family of small, chattering monkeys, a porcupine that rattled its quills indignantly before disappearing from sight, and a huge lizard basking on the sunny side of a tree, all held his attention in turn.

Presently his aimless circling brought him

to the well-defined trail by which the Bololos had departed, and he followed it a little way because he knew that Celia had preceded him there by only a few hours. He strolled around a turn of the path and immediately the thick foliage concealed the resting-place of the war party and cut off from his ears the voices of the Batatekes, who chattered worse than the little monkeys.

His glance was abruptly caught by an object that is not a common sight nowadays even in the heart of a Congo jungle, and he halted, fascinated.

To one side of the trail, and facing it with an air of lofty dignity, was the skeleton of a large elephant, complete in every detail but one from the small bones of its tail to the immense bone of its skull; only the tusks were missing, gone to enrich some lucky finder. Rushton hardly noticed such trivial details. His eyes were riveted on the head of the elephant, bleached to a dazzling whiteness by the rays of a thousand suns, and a phrase rang loud in his ears.

"The eye of a white elephant!" he muttered.

He left the trail and approached the skeleton with a hesitating step. He felt himself upon the threshold of the unknown, the unnatural. Surrounded by shimmering waves of heat, he felt his body turn suddenly cold as he drew near.

It was with a conscious effort that he thrust his fingers into one of the empty, staring sockets, and he experienced a sharp thrill of relief when they encountered nothing but bone. It was with more assurance that he pursued his investigations into the second cavity.

Then a chill shook him from head to foot as he mechanically plucked forth a scrap of folded paper with his initials scrawled upon its face.

CHAPTER XIII.

"GOT IT!"

IT seemed to Celia that she had scarcely gone to sleep before she was aroused by the bustle of the awakening camp. She crawled out of her blankets with leaden

limbs and bruised body, the result of her torturesome journey in the rough litter, made a scanty toilet, and reluctantly came out of her tent to face the trials of another day.

Burk and Smale were waiting for her and joined her with as many breakfast delicacies as their slim larder afforded. It was a singular characteristic of both these men that they could be ruffianly to the last degree at one moment and full of thoughtful courtesy the next; either one of them would have placed a cushion behind a woman's head as cheerfully as he would have slipped a knife into her white throat if occasion demanded it.

The Boer, as usual, was grim and taciturn, but his tall companion saw fit to carry on a running conversation during the course of their simple meal. Celia answered him, when possible, in monosyllables, her thoughts far on the back trail with Rushton and the speeding Batateke warriors.

"How much of the gold will you be wanting for your share, Miss Celia?" demanded the Irishman.

"I don't want other people's things," she answered shortly.

"Then I'll take your share and buy pretty gewgaws for my wife—so you see, you'll get it, anyway!"

"You'll be hanged long before I'm your wife," she observed with an air of detachment, and Smale chuckled delightedly.

"You're in luck, Dan," he commented. "Any sensible man prefers the hangman's noose to the parson's."

Celia regarded the misogynist with mild approval. "Please talk to him more like that," she urged. "Probably you have more influence with him than I."

"Faith, and that's not so," laughed Burk. "He's a good business man, is Piet, and a useful chap in a scrimmage, but I'd sooner take advice from a crab in matters of sentiment."

"Sentiment!" she flared. "If kidnaping a woman is your idea of sentiment I'm glad that you're not really romantic!"

She rose to the sound of Smale's appreciative chuckles, turned her back upon the two men, and walked away.

Apparently no restriction was placed

upon her movements, and even when she passed the edge of the encampment and was temporarily lost to view she could detect no indication of concern on the part of her captors. For one wild moment she contemplated a dash for freedom with the idea that she might conceal herself in the tall grasses and possibly get in touch with C'Wayo. But to attempt such a thing would be absurd. She knew too well the animal ability possessed by the African savage in tracking down his prey; she would not be gone ten minutes before she was discovered, no matter how skillfully she might strive to blind her trail. Before sadly retracing her steps she cast one long glance about her, eager for some sign of her native ally, but nothing met her eye save the solid, impenetrable fastness of the jungle.

The character of the country through which they passed changed rapidly during the morning's march. First they left the slim belt of forest behind and came to more plains; their tall grass gave way in turn to a short, cruel stubble, parched brown by the merciless sun of the dry season. They were approaching the foothills of the Pallaballa Mountains now, and the stubble was patched here and there with stretches of rocky soil that was barren of life. This feature became more pronounced as they left one hill after another behind them and the trail began to sweep steadily upward. They were coming to the mountains themselves, and in a little while they were surrounded by masses of towering volcanic rock, whose bases they circled by narrow, intricate defiles.

Greatly to Smale's relief the Bololo chief made no effort to force the pace. The Boer managed to carry on a desultory exchange of ideas with Burk, by whose side he trudged patiently.

"The higher I go the lower I get," he confessed.

"It's these damn rocks," complained Burk. "They'd weigh down the soul of the Angel Gabriel himself. Did you ever see such a waste of a country?"

"I rather looked for a scrap somewhere about here. Isn't this the sacred spot where the Batatekes hang their hats when they're home?"

"Not quite. I asked Lombo about that this morning. He said that their country lies more to the south of this. I was a bit sorry to hear it myself, for there's nothing like a shillalah to keep a man in shape!"

Smale grinned sourly. "We'll have enough and to spare of that before we get through," he predicted.

"Maybe you're right; sure, there'll be a fine scrimmage before I consent to give that greasy lump of a Lombo a full third of our gold!"

"Let me see that map," said the Boer abruptly.

He took the precious document from his companion and studied it as he walked.

"The Loando River," he read aloud. "A tall rock shaped like a pyramid on the northern bank. Cross stream there. Proceed two hundred yards west on southern bank—and a black cross marks the holy place!" He handed back the diagram. "How much did you tell the chief, Dan?"

"I told him to lead us to the river where it comes out of the real mountains. Then we will follow it westward until we strike the landmark."

"I hope we're nearly there," sighed the Boer. "Gold or no gold, I'll be glad when we're safe aboard a ship with Africa dropping far astern."

"Don't lose your nerve," counseled Burk. "Remember, if we clean up on this racket we'll be able to retire and live on our incomes like little gentlemen."

An hour later, as they painfully toiled to the crest of a steep hill, Lombo shouted back to them from his place at the head of the line. They hurried to join him.

"Him Loando," he announced, and waved a huge black arm toward the valley that lay before them.

Burk stared down at the gray, arid prospect and looked doubtful.

"It's a river I'm wanting," he objected.

"Don't be an ass," begged Smale. "You know everything dries up at this time of the year. That's the bed of a river down there."

The big man gave a relieved sigh and swept an eager glance as far west as he could see, but there was no sign of the mark he sought. On the other hand, about a

mile up the bed of the stream, there was a great shoulder of rock that jutted out and cut off all view of what lay beyond. Deposits of mica dotted its surface, catching and reflecting the rays of the sun, and sparkling with a cheerful promise of treasure at hand. For all Burk knew the massive butte might conceal the rocky sign post that he hunted, and he waved his hand to Lombo to indicate the direction that they should now take.

Anoka, as ever at his chief's elbow, interjected a remark whose tone struck ominously on the ears of the white men, though the words meant little. The fetish doctor was distinctly sulky, and it soon became plain that Lombo was attempting to placate him. Apparently he succeeded, for Anoka subsided into silence.

"I caught just one word of that lingo," confided Smale as the march was resumed a minute later, "and that was 'map.'"

"H-m!" Burk looked thoughtful. "It's pounds to pence the beggar was insisting on a glimpse of it."

"We can let them see it if it comes to a pinch," the Boer decided. "Half the directions are written in English, and a precious lot of good that will do him."

A stony, twisting path brought them from the crest of the hill to the edge of the river bed. Celia was forced to leave her litter and scramble down the hillside, so steep was the descent in spots. It would have been dangerous to risk these places with the clumsy stretcher.

It worried and annoyed the Irishman to notice that Anoka was sending curious and speculative glances at the girl; Burk was quite alive to the possibility of some savage stealing the girl and selling her into captivity for the price, perhaps, of one good debauch. He finally scowled at the African with such a threatening mien that the Bololo thereafter kept his eyes sullenly fixed on the ground beneath his feet.

If the drop from the hill to the valley was difficult their way along the edge of the river was undiluted agony. There was not the faintest semblance of a path. Sharp stones and treacherous, rounded pebbles played havoc with their feet and tempers. The barefooted savages fared better than

the leather-shod white men, but at the end of a mile they would gladly have halted for a rest.

Luckily for them all this distance carried them around the grim butte whose jutting mass had obstructed their view of the farther valley, and it was Burk who gave a shout of pleasure at the sight of a huge boulder that reared itself in the air scarcely half a mile ahead. It was shaped to the perfect form of a pyramid.

In the exuberance of his spirits Burk swung a heavy hand upon his friend's shoulder, nearly bowing over the smaller man.

"By gad, we've done it!" he cried. "Hit it within a mile on the very first try. A bit of all right—what?"

Smale grunted non-committally. Even the sight of their goal did not revive his drooping spirits. Instead of eying it with the rapt enthusiasm displayed by the Irishman, he turned away his gaze almost immediately and searched the barren landscape to their rear.

"What's the matter?" asked Burk.

"N-nothing! Guess I'm seeing things. I thought a while ago that I spotted some one dodging behind a rock a mile or more back of us."

"Let 'em dodge!" cried the jubilant adventurer. "We're strong enough to hold our own against a hundred will-o'-the-wisps."

The Boer permitted his doubts to be silenced, but in proof of his anxiety he suddenly unslung his heavy rifle from his back and looked carefully to its efficiency.

Burk hurried to the head of the line to apprise Lombo of the good news. The Bololo's eye lit up with a swift gleam of avarice as he learned that they had reached the end of their journey.

"You know where him gold?"

Burk winked at him jovially.

"Tell you later," he promised.

They reached the pyramidal rock and halted. The warriors threw down their weapons and the bags of supplies that they carried and settled themselves to rest in whatever shade they could find. The heat, Smale commented, would have baked bread, and the surface of the rocks would have fried a salamander.

Burk, glancing about him, suddenly discovered that he was the cynosure of every eye. Each one of the Bololos wore an air of expectancy, and all were plainly waiting for him to satisfy their hopes.

"Look at the ruddy blighters," grunted Smale. "Wouldn't you know that fat fool Lombo would spill the whole yarn to them?"

"Don't see that it makes much difference," commented Burk. "They'd have to know sooner or later if we're going to cart the stuff away from here. What now, Piet? If the map's right we must be within two hundred yards of a tidy fortune. Shall we look for it right away? Or shall we eat first?"

"Eat," said Smale. "It always pays to keep natives waiting."

Burk stared at him in admiration.

"You've a nice knack of self-control, Piet! Me own fingers are itching for the feel of yellow dust."

He strolled away to see about pitching Celia's tent in the coolest spot he could find. The girl, wearied and worn as she never had been before in all her life, watched him with apathetic indifference. She knew that these villainous men had come within sight of their goal, but her exhausted spirits could not react to the excitement of that moment. Her strength was spent, and when Burk finally raised the flap of her tent she was barely able to stagger into its shelter. She shook her head mutely at his suggestion of lunch.

The two adventurers were amused a few minutes later by the heavy air of gloom that settled upon over a hundred black faces as they sedately proceeded to open cans of food. Even Lombo permitted his jaws to drop in frank disappointment. Anoka, however, preserved the inscrutability of demeanor that was his predominant characteristic; if he displayed any emotion at all it was revealed by the glint of amusement in his eyes that possibly marked his understanding and appreciation of the motive that underlay the white men's studied attitude of indifference.

Their souls bursting with impatience, Burk and Smale completed their meal with calculated leisure. But it was ended at last,

and Burk gave a sigh of satisfaction as he drove his fork into the ground and wiped it on his sock in pious observance of the sacred rite of washing up. He came briskly to his feet.

"Come on!" he cried. "I won't wait another minute to tantalize all the tribes in Africa."

He led off with long strides that made Smale hurry to keep up with him.

"Cross the river," he quoted. "I don't have to look at the map to know what it says!"

His comrade, with his usual caution, kept watch behind as well as before.

"Here come Lombo and his everlasting shadow," he remarked presently.

Burk looked back and laughed.

"Cheeky swine! Wouldn't have thought they'd risk it without a bodyguard."

"Huh?" Smale raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Thinking of doing them in?"

"I've had worse ideas!" responded the callous Burk complacently. "I suggest that we leave their fate to circumstances. For all we know they may be planning a bit of fancy knife work on their own."

Smale said no more, but as they picked a difficult way to the other side of the river bed, slipping and sliding on the water-worn stones of the channel, he surreptitiously drew his favorite weapon from its sheath and tested its point on the ball of his thumb.

"Proceed two hundred yards west on southern bank," quoted Burk again as they reached the further edge of the dry water course.

He silently counted his paces as he strode along the bank. With Spartan will power he forbore to look ahead, a victim of the superstition that things too much desired fade from view as they come within reach.

At the count of two hundred he stopped short and glanced about him. He gave a long, happy sigh.

"Got it!" he said.

Smale came up and stood beside him. To the right of them, in the face of a low cliff, was a narrow, dark opening.

"A cave!" exclaimed the Boer. "That sure looks good to me!"

(To be continued)



Vanity Hair

By JACK WHITMAN

IF Mr. Kipling had been writing the story of Lucia Lyons, his well-known refrain would doubtless have read something like this:

A rag, a bone, *and* a hank of hair—
And the camera called her a woman fair!

In Lucia's case the hair alone carried the compelling illusion of fairness. Nobody, not even the fool of the poem, would have called her fair if it had not been for that golden crown of glory she acquired. Without it, if she wasn't exactly an ugly duckling, Lucia was at least an insignificant little goose, winning never a first or second look from the most philandering of ganders.

But the hair!

It happened thus. Lucia was employed as hair dresser in the exclusive establishment of Madame Murphy, the well-known beauty specialist. Madame was justly fa-

mous for what she had done and undone in the development of feminine beauty. Her treatments were as effective as they were expensive. Her permanent waves were more durable than any others, as well as less painful to the person being waved. Her complexion creams, a different one for every texture of skin from tender to pachyderm, were marvelous mixtures, as she would tell you herself, of oriental oils, unusual unguents and forgotten fragrances. Madame Murphy was the high priestess of the cult of beauty, and naturally enough conducted her salon where it would attract the greatest number of beautiful or hopeful women—in the metropolis of films and climate.

If there was any great star of the silver screen who did not frequent the salon, it was only because she was rich enough to

have Madame send one of her capable young assistants to her home.

Lucia Lyons was one of the most capable, and also one of the least obtrusive, of these assistants. She had a lithe strength that gave her shampoos a vigor lacking in others, and her manner was just self-effacing and worshipful enough to win the patrons of Madame. As a hairdresser Lucia was an unqualified success.

But success, as wise men have often pointed out, does not mean happiness. Lucia was not happy. How could she be when every working day of her life she saw the lovely ladies of the screen in the salon of Madame? How could she but envy them? Were they not the chosen, the elect, of the world, with their lustrous and plentiful hair, their fair and delicate skins, their bright and happy eyes?

Lucia had very little hair, too little even to bob, and it was of a strange, neutral color, somewhere between cold gray and dull brown. It had no luster, no life, no shine. Worse than that, its color affected the natural pallor of her skin. If it hadn't been for her hair, her skin would have been a clear ivory, delicately tinted and not without charm. But her hair lent its own dullness to her complexion, so that she had a perpetual gray look. In the same way her eyes, which normally were hazel, and which might have been pools of fascinating brown lighted with green, took on the dull tones of her hair. It was her undoing; it destroyed whatever claims to attractiveness her delicate chin, well-modeled mouth, upturned nose and frank eyes might have made.

You have seen girls like that, somehow colorless, seemingly lifeless. Perhaps you have even stopped to analyze their features, to lay your finger on the blemish that makes them drab. If you have been puzzled, finding their features of an average, next time look at their hair. You will probably find the wrong note in their color scheme right there.

Lucia, after many painstaking self-inspections, had arrived at that conclusion. But not even the ménage of Madame Murphy possessed the magic to give her what nature had denied. She couldn't bob

the hank that clothed her pate without enhancing its scantiness and in no way relieving its dull drab. She stubbornly refused to dye it because it would require repeated experiments to determine just what shade suited her eyes and skin. And not even Madame's expensive compound designed to produce an abundance of lovely hair had any effect upon her scalp.

More or less resigned, but none the less unhappy, Lucia took an envious, vicarious delight in the hair of others, stroking it as if it were her own, caring for it as a miser cherishes his gold.

One day one of the most beautiful ladies of the screen—a girl whose dark bobbed hair Lucia had often curled—came into the salon and ordered from Madame a blond wig. Lucia was standing beside Madame as she took the order, and heard what the distinguished star said.

"You see, I'm doing a picture where I've simply got to be blond," she explained. "It's called 'The Yellow Queen' and it's a dual rôle. Most of the time I'm this wicked blond adventuress, with a wonderful head of yellow hair; the rest of the time I'm myself, in my own mop. Half-sisters, you see, one light and the other dark. So the wig must be the very best you can make, Madame, with fine, long, curly hair. Don't mind the expense, because the company will pay the bill! That's what they get for putting me in such a part."

Madame herself supervised the manufacture of the wig, but Lucia, who had done similar work before, performed the greater part of the labor. In order to increase her none too ample wages she often took it home with her and so earned a few dollars for her extra time. Besides, the star was in a hurry for the wig.

Upon one such evening, when Lucia's discontent was greater, keener than usual, she was sighing over her final work upon the beautiful blond locks that were to adorn the actress when she happened to look into the mirror before her. She saw her own unlovely, mud-colored crown and sighed. Then, on a sudden impulse, she smoothed her hair carefully over her head and fitted the blond wig over it.

The wide-eyed girl who looked back at

her from the mirror, her lips parted in surprise, was as lovely as any screen star whose photograph adorned the walls of her room. Lucia Lyons, the dull and the drab, was indeed transformed. In a trice she had become a beauty, even in the cold electric light of the room. Her skin had lost its grayness, her eyes were clear and sparkling and the wig dropped enticing yellow curls over her white brow.

"Gee!" she said to herself. "What do you think of that? Can you beat it?"

She burst into laughter, then into tears. One glimpse of beauty, one flash of what she might have been had nature been more kind, and that was all. For a long time she sat there before the mirror, laughing and crying over the beauty she had borrowed but could not keep. She could not bear to remove the blond curls that had changed her; she shuddered as she thought of what lay underneath, ready to mock her as soon as she lifted the wig.

It was not until she was ready for bed and had turned out the light that she took it off. If she couldn't see her own ugliness it wouldn't be so bad. Then she crept into bed and dreamed.

The next day the wig was delivered to the star, and Lucia relapsed into her former drabness. But now there was a new light in her eyes. She had seen a glimpse of a feminine heaven, and her dream had given her wings.

II.

THREE months after her experiment with the blond wig Lucia accepted her last weekly wage from Madame Murphy and informed the lady that she had been called home to Kokomo because of the death of a maiden aunt. Why she said Kokomo she did not know, and why she invented a maiden aunt she could not have explained, except that she wanted to blot out her past and her identity with one stroke.

For three months she had worked and saved for this day. Three months of long hours, continual toil, meager lunches. It had been difficult to buy the glorious head of hair she wanted, difficult and costly, but at last it had been acquired and carried home. Then, at intervals, she had pur-

chased at wholesale prices the other requisites of the wig-makers' art. Now, at last, it was finished.

She ran rapidly up the stairs of her rooming house and locked the door behind her. To-day she was moving. Already the baggage man had transported her trunk to a new address on the cheaper borders of Hollywood. A drooping hat and a concealing veil, which she had bought for this occasion, would conceal the glory she had wrought for herself when she had left the house.

Before her mirror she adjusted the yellow, silken mass of curls, coifed it smartly with her adroit fingers, and looked into the mirror.

The result was far beyond her hopes, even, for the wig was a work of art, a thing of loving care, better by far than the one she had made for the star of "*The Yellow Queen*."

The old lady in whose house she had taken a room gasped when Lucia let down that mass of gold.

"I never saw such hair," she declared. "My dear, you'd oughta be a great star, with that to go on."

Lucia was too sensible to have any such sanguine hope. Nature, in withholding hirsute beauty, had endowed her with common sense. She had no illusions about being an actress or having a career. Her adventure was simply a vacation, offering her chance to get away from what she had always been, and to be for a while something else. She wanted to taste the delights of being beautiful, wanted to hear herself called lovely, wanted to win the admired glances of men and women—especially of one man.

Lucia had seen her particular idol so many times, not only on the screen, but "in person," as the billboards say, that she knew every expression of his handsome, debonair countenance. His was the only masculine photograph upon the walls of her room, and he smiled out of the picture from the midst of a bevy of feminine stars, surrounded by them very much as the star of a musical comedy is surrounded by the chorus in the final ensemble.

His name was Reginald Berkeley, at least upon the screen. The surname was pro-

nounced as if it were spelled with an *a* rather than an *e*. Bahkley. Like that. It suited his aristocratic and supercilious appearance.

Lucia had often cast adoring eyes upon him in the salon of Madame Murphy, which he sometimes entered in the company of one or more of her patrons. He was unlike other men who found themselves in that feminine retreat. Others were nervous and ill at ease; he enjoyed it. He was entirely conscious of the admiring glances of the women there, but he was even more aware of his own attractiveness.

Lucia thought he was wonderful. The day after she had moved into her new room she started for his studio. She didn't care whether she won a place in the firmament of celluloid celebrities or not, but she was going to try to win an admiring glance from Reginald. She had saved enough money to spend two months enjoying the effects of her new beauty upon Hollywood, but the best way to interest Reginald was to try for a place in the cast of one of his pictures.

In Madame Murphy's salon he had never given her a glance. Her adoration had been unrequited, if not scorned. There was a tinge of feminine resentment in her plan to bring him to her feet and to hear his compliments in her ears.

She had heard enough about the inside of studios from the girls whose hair she had dressed to be familiar with the routine. At the studio she headed directly for the door that was labeled "Casting Director." She had wisely chosen an hour when there were few other applicants besieging that harassed and temperamental individual. Besides, exercising her common sense and the experience she had had in securing other jobs, she had carefully planned a line of attack. She was a novice only in her inexperience.

Without knocking she entered the office of the casting director, who sat at a flat-topped desk looking cynically at a pile of photographs. He looked up as she entered.

"Well?" he grunted.

"Listen, old dear," said Lucia, with a daring she had never possessed until she had acquired the crown of gold, "give me a couple of minutes and tell me straight! It

will save you a lot of time in the long run, because if you don't I'll have to hang around here pestering you for a job until you call the police and have me put out. How about it?"

She smiled boldly and took off her hat, murmuring "Gee, it's hot?"

The director's interest was won by the revelation of blond curls that followed the removal of the plain sailor.

"Go ahead, sister!" he grinned. "What's on your mind?"

Lucia Lyons sat down and crossed her legs.

"Well, it's like this," she explained. "I'm a poor hard-working show girl—you know, chorus, cheap burlesque and all that. Once I thought I had a voice, but I doubt it. I've never been hit by the movie bug, because I know I can't act. When they give me a part with two speaking lines I get stage fright. But my show busted in Phoenix—I'm stranded and broke. Now tell me straight, is there any chance in the movies? I can't act and I know it. I don't photograph like a million dollars, and maybe I wouldn't—what do you call it?—register worth thirty cents. But I've got a mop of fuzz on the bean. See!"

With a deft and experienced gesture she let down her hair. Its glorious golden curls fell in sparkling waves below her waist. Tendrils crept over her brow and fell softly down her cheeks.

The casting director gasped. There wasn't a head of hair like it on the lot! And the girl was there, too. She wasn't one of those tiresome correspondence school graduates, or a small town runaway child. She was a show girl, with no illusions and no hope. He had troupied himself in the old days and he knew the life. He admired the kid's courage.

"That's all I've got, I guess," went on Lucia, aware of his admiring interest. "Will it pay the old room rent and buy me chop suey? Is it worth an extra's job? Or shall I cut it off and sell it for mattress stuffing?"

"You'll do, kid!" said the casting director. "I like your line of talk. Good Lord, it's great to have a sensible child come in here occasionally. I can't give you any-

thing today, right off, but I'll promise you something. We're making a big spectacle with a lot of fairy tale scenes in it—fairies, princesses, nymphs, dryads, all that kind of bunk. Your hair will fit in there, I think. Of course, it's only atmosphere, but it will last for a couple of weeks at seven and a half a day. How about it?"

"How about it? Oh, boy, I can still eat! Thanks. When do we start?"

"Day after to-morrow, at nine o'clock. Give me your name and address and telephone number. And say, if you're flat, I can let you have a couple of days' advance."

He reached for his pocket.

"No, thanks just the same. I've still got a few pennies. Whose picture is it?"

"All-star feature," he replied, as she wrote down her name and address. "Gloria Mansfield and Reginald Berkeley are playing the leads."

"And Lucia Lyons," she added, tossing the filled-in blank to the man. "So-long, and thanks a lot."

III.

LUCIA did not become a star overnight. Neither did she advance beyond the atmosphere class. But, thanks to the casting director, whose friendship she had made, she was kept working on an average of five days out of every week. At seven dollars and a half per diem she was earning twice as much as Madame Murphy had paid her. And she had succeeded in her ambition. Men and women admired her hair, praised her beauty. Wherever she appeared she attracted attention, either envious or admiring. She became known as the girl with the hair. Casting directors saw and remembered her; she was always wanted to add her loveliness to elaborate scenes.

She bought clothes lavishly and moved from her inexpensive room into a diminutive bungalow court apartment, where she could be alone and could sometimes relapse into her proper person, just for the sake of contrast. It was a delightful secret joke, and she often chuckled over it. It would have been nicer if she had some one she could confide in, but that of course was impossible. The deception she was prac-

ticing made close friendships dangerous; she had many acquaintances but no real friends. She was just a little lonely. In public she had always to be on guard, playing the part she had chosen for herself, that of a rather sophisticated show girl who had been stranded and had entered the movies. But, inside, she wasn't at all that kind of a girl.

The casting director remained her best friend, but he was the last person in whom she would confide her delicious secret, and with him, more than with any one else, she had to be what she had at first pretended to be.

She was thankful for the protective coloring of her pose when she met Reginald Berkeley. From the first day on the set, when he saw her hair let down over her shoulders in the fairy tale scenes of the spectacle, his admiring eyes had rested upon her more and more often. Other ladies of greater fame and equal beauty filled most of his time, but he never missed an opportunity to flatter and ogle Lucia. At first Lucia was flattered, almost overcome indeed by the man's suave and practiced manner, but she had been quickly disillusioned one day when she had overheard him addressing another girl in the same company in the identical words he had used to her.

Besides, she had listened to many caustic appraisals of her idol. The other girls knew him for a vain and vapid egoist. Lucia removed his photograph from her collection, and held him at arm's length with the bold cynicism of the show girl she pretended to be.

Just when William Bailey, milkman, entered her existence, is not known. Every morning at eight o'clock he left a pint of milk and a half-pint of cream at the rear door of Lucia's bungalow. Once a month he collected his bill. The first time he saw the girl she was not wearing her beautiful wig. She was herself, as only she could look, but her eyes twinkled with the suppressed jest of her existence, and the green kimono she wore was in itself an intriguing garment. After that first meeting, Lucia relieved her loneliness by appearing at the door and taking the bottles from him every

day. Naturally those meetings were not without interest for both the participants.

Bill Bailey had a fresh, glowing skin that advertised the product he delivered, and a breezy, easy way that was refreshingly independent. Not many of the actors and actresses to whom he delivered milk greeted him with a smile in the morning; for the most part they snobbishly looked down upon a man who was not an artist. That didn't bother Bill in the slightest degree, for he had little respect for them, but it was nice to have a girl meet you every morning and smile and chat a moment. It relieved the monotony of milk delivery for him just as it relieved Lucia's loneliness.

With Bill she could be herself, wigless and natural. He saw her as she was, rather ordinary looking, but with a nice smile and a pleasant word. And that green kimono was an intriguing costume. It wouldn't be bad to have a kimono similar to that one hanging in his own little bungalow.

"Are you in the pictures?" he asked one morning, early in their acquaintance.

"Oh, no," said Lucia. "I—I'm a hairdresser."

"Say, I'm darn glad of that!" Bill allowed. "I can't see these movies janes for dust. They've all got a lot of stuck-up notions about clothes and things. It makes me tired. Of course, a girl should dress pretty, but there's no use going crazy about things. And they all think that because they happen to be pretty the world owes 'em a living. It ain't their fault they're born that way. They give me a pain, don't they you? A girl like you that works hard for her living has 'em beat ten ways!"

IV.

LUCIA was playing a very small part—now at ten dollars a day—in a new picture in which Reginald Berkeley had a leading rôle. Reginald invited her to dine with him at a beach resort in Venice, but she declined. The invitation was repeated and she compromised by eating lunch with him in the studio cafeteria. But she did not

have much of an appetite. The actor's conversation was a little difficult to handle. She had to resort to the slangiest lines in her show girl repertory. And that only seemed to make him more dangerous. Taking her for what she represented herself to be, he had sized her up as a wise burlesque girl who knew the world and the ways thereof, and who would probably be willing to overlook some of the conventions in order to advance herself in motion pictures. His implications became distasteful and unpleasant to the little prude who dwelt beneath the crown of curls. Her pose left her suddenly and at that same time she left the table, with a remark that was altogether a part of the decent little hairdresser who had worked hard for her living.

Murder will out, so they say. At the next table there happened to be, on this particular day, another girl from Madame Murphy's salon, a girl who had been sent out to the studio to marcel the raven locks of a great star. She had been looking at Lucia for many minutes, trying to place that familiar face without success. But when the girl spoke aloud and left the table the other hairdresser was sure it was Lucy Lyons.

Just to satisfy her curiosity she asked the handsome, smiling man at the table, Reginald told her.

"What do you think of that?" said the hairdresser to herself.

"Of what?"

"Darn if Lucy hasn't got herself a wig and got into pictures!" the girl exclaimed.

"What?" demanded Reginald.

The story of Lucia's drab past came out. It was too choice a bit to keep, and besides, the hairdresser didn't know who the man was or what she was giving away. It might be that Lucy was wearing the wig just in one picture.

The first scene to be shot that afternoon was one, to Lucia's dismay, in which she had to walk across the drawing-room set with Reginald Berkeley's arm about her waist. She hated him and hated the scene, but the director's orders had to be carried out. Besides, he couldn't say or do anything while they were on the set. She wasn't afraid of him, she told herself, even

if he was a leading man. And if she got the chance she would tell the casting director all about it! He was a regular guy, and he would understand.

As they rehearsed the action of the scene, walking through a door at the back of the stage and approaching the camera, Lucia felt Reginald's arm leave her waist and steal up her back. She didn't know what he intended to do, but she wished the scene was over. She did not feel his touch upon her hair, because one doesn't feel the touch of a hand upon a wig. But suddenly, in that exposed place, with many eyes upon her, she felt utterly nude. Her hands fluttered to her curls; to her dismay they had almost fallen off, hanging over her right ear, exposing her own dull hair. The "girl with the hair" was a fraud!

Two things she heard in the moment that followed. First, the perfunctory but malicious "I beg your pardon" of Berkeley; and then a shout of merry laughter, in which Berkeley, the director, his assistant, the camera man and his helpers, the electricians and props joined gleefully.

Her cheeks burned with shame. Tears filled her hazel eyes. Her beautiful curls hung ludicrously over her ears. Pursued by the laughter and blinded by her own tears she ran from the set and into the dressing-room, adjusting the wig as she went. There she seized her hat and cloak, her make-up box and suit case, and ran again, this time to the outer studio gate. She stopped for nothing until she had gained the street car that would take her home.

The casting director, who had seen her flight past his office door, went out on the lot to investigate. He found the set where Lucia had been working still in an uproar of laughter. Between chokes and gasps, with malice in his voice, Berkeley told what had happened.

"You should have seen your prize beauty without her hair," he chortled. "Oh, what a comedy face! And to think that even I fell for those curls!"

The casting director didn't even smile. He knew Berkeley and he knew life. Hundreds of aspirants came to him and begged for work in the movies, begged and pleaded and wept and flirted. Lucia had come in

a different way. He had liked her, and had backed her to the limit. But now he saw what she had been up against, what a struggle she had made to carry off the part she had assumed. He smiled gently at the pathetic subterfuge she had invented as he walked back to the office.

"The poor little kid!" he said. "She had nerve and brains. That's a new one on me! I'll bet she's all cut up about it. I'll drop around tomorrow and see what I can do for her."

The following morning Lucia met Bill Bailey for the last time. Her eyes were stained from hours of crying; her spirit crushed.

"I'll take my bill, please," she said. "I'm moving today."

"What's the matter, girl?" demanded Bill. "Who's been making you cry? Tell your big brother! Come on."

Well—she told him. Not right away. Not without much urging and many smiles and a lot of talk. But at last she had told him the whole story, about buying the wig material and pretending to be a chorus girl and everything. She told him, too, how she enjoyed seeing him every morning, because with him she did not have to pretend. She even put on the blond curls to let him see how beautiful she had been, but he rudely took them off.

"I don't like 'em at all," he commented. "They make you look too much like a movie actress. I like you better as you are—you look like a regular human being and not a big doll."

Somehow, amid sighs and tears and shaky laughter, Lucia's dull brown common sense head rested on Bill Bailey's cheap cotton shirt. And then he was kissing her, and his kisses were warm and sweet like warm sweet milk, and she was kissing him back.

And when the kind-hearted casting director got around to see what he could do for Lucia he was too late. Lucia Lyons, herself, was married to Bill Bailey, milkman. "The girl with the hair" had left Hollywood forever.

The blond wig has been sold to Madame Murphy to help pay for the furniture of the house of William Bailey.



His Third Master

By **MAX BRAND**

Author of "The Garden of Eden," "Gun Gentlemen," "The Untamed," etc.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE BARGAIN.

NO matter what else she may have been, and Mrs. Littleton was known to have various qualities, she proved herself on this day a prophet of extraordinary insight; for Dickon Greene, a moment or two after she made her prophecy to Mrs. Dickens, was speeding in a taxicab straight for the house of Mrs. Rainey.

The address which North had given him brought him to an imposing front on Park Avenue, before which a rather stout gentleman was dismounting from a saddle horse. Standing beside the horse with his hands planted firmly on his hips while he scowled at the graceful lines of his mount, Dickon noted that the corpulence was all

above the waist; the legs were lean and crooked out, the legs of a horseman who has spent most of his life in a saddle.

He turned away from the horse, whose reins a groom was gathering preparatory to leading it back to the stables, and went up the front steps side by side with Dickon. He nodded to Dickon with a perturbed air.

"You're coming in?" he said unnecessarily.

"My name is Greene—Dickon Greene; Mr. Rainey, I suppose?"

"Right. Glad to know you, sir." It was plain that if the name of Dickon Greene had ever been pronounced within his hearing before it had slipped at once out of his memory. He pushed with the key in the lock and glared after the departing horse.

" You see that?" he asked Dickon.

" Yes."

" What beats me is how they can stick a damned postage stamp like that on the back of a horse and call it a saddle! D'you make it out?"

Dickon directed his smile so that it spread over the side of his face which was farthest from his prospective father-in-law.

" Not bad for jumping," he suggested.

" To hell with jumping!" exploded Rainey. " Who wants to jump a horse in a park? Besides, it knocks out their shoulders sooner or later. Nothing practical about it, I say."

" For real work or long rides? I suppose a heavy saddle is better."

" That's sense, Mr. Greene. My wife—"

He closed his teeth on the rest of the sentence, but his lips told something savage to himself.

" Come in," he invited, jerking the door open.

" If you'll let Mrs. Rainey know that Dickon Greene is calling—" he began.

" Sure, I'll let her know. Why not let her know yourself? Come on in."

Dickon bowed and entered while the host slammed the door heavily behind them.

" Hey, Louise!" he called. " Step in here and make yourself comfortable while I find her, Mr. Greene. Let me have your hat. Just a moment, now."

Dickon found himself in a drawing-room appointed so beautifully that he gasped with surprise. Some interior decorator had been at work here—or had Cynthia herself directed the outfitting of the room? It was gray for a background, but against that background here and there were bold dashes of color which no amateur was apt to think of—a dark red chair, for instance, and curtains a rich blue. He noted these things carefully, feeling that he was compiling data of importance.

Meantime a great voice wound up a stairs from the hall calling in stentorian tones: " Louise! Hey, Louise!"

A door was hurriedly opened and closed, and a voice answered him sharply.

" There's a young chap down there to see you, Louise. Name's Greene."

The feminine undertone of Mrs. Rainey

was not intelligible, but Dickon smiled as he heard the answer " My voice wasn't cut out for parlor whispers. Why shouldn't he hear me?"

Another interruption.

Then: " The devil with that. Another thing, Louise, I'm damned if I'll ride through the park again with that infernal bit of shoe leather under me. I tell you, it made a laughing stock out of me. It's the last time!"

There was a flurry of excited undertones, then a door hurriedly shut as it had been opened.

" She's thanking God," murmured Dickon, " that she has the old boy out of earshot."

Presently down the stairs came a regular, precise, tap-tap of descending feet. Mrs. William Rainey appeared in the door as coolly formal as she had been the night before. She was one of the old school, rigidly corseted morning, noon and night, and keeping her back straight, standing or sitting.

" I'm sorry I couldn't telephone before I came," said Dickon.

" Don't worry about that, Mr. Greene. But Cynthia will be sorry to miss you; she hasn't stirred since she got to bed."

" The news I've brought is for her," said Dickon, and then he paused and looked at her with meaning. " But I think it will be more to the point to tell it to you."

" Yes?" murmured Mrs. William Rainey, and something in her eye told Dickon that she expected anything from him and was keyed to receive it well.

" I have just told Mrs. Littleton an atrocious fib," he went on, " and the fib included your daughter."

" Oh!" exclaimed the matron, but she was apparently not greatly shocked by the coupling of Cynthia with the society leader.

" Mrs. Littleton asked me to her country place for the coming week-end."

" You lucky man!" muttered Mrs. Rainey. " Well?"

He paused again and watched her keenly.

" I think I understand you, Mrs. Rainey, and I hope you will understand me."

" I'm going to try to," she said with energy.

"Let's shake hands on that."

"I shall!" she said with unnecessary warmth. And she did. The nervous closing of her fingers was like the touch of a man's hand.

"I told Mrs. Littleton that I couldn't come," said Dickon, "because Cynthia Rainey and I had planned to give an old-fashioned picnic and take a party up the river next week-end."

"But Cynthia hasn't told me a word about it!"

"That's it; Cynthia hasn't heard a word about it as yet. I'm depending on you to tell her."

Mrs. Rainey blinked, bewildered.

He explained: "I didn't say a single word directly to your daughter last night, Mrs. Rainey; there wasn't a chance for us to talk about picnics or anything else. But since we've shaken hands I think you'll let me say that I'm extremely interested in her career."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Rainey.

She was letting nothing escape her. Her bright, small eyes flicked here and there across his face, missing not a single detail of his expression.

It was the difficult part of Dickon's speech, but he determined to go bravely ahead with it. He must have a definite understanding with Mrs. Rainey; he must really strike what could be vulgarly termed a bargain. He had an idea that Mrs. Rainey would not be above it.

"We both know," he went on, "that when one comes to New York it isn't always easy to become friendly with just the sort of people one prefers to know."

Mrs. Rainey sighed as one who throws a great burden from her shoulders.

"Listen to me, Dickon Greene," she said. "I think we *do* understand each other. Let's stop beating about the bush and talk straight. Cynthia is trying to break in and you're trying to help her; you tried last night!"

"I'm glad we don't have to dodge corners in our talk," said Dickon.

"Nary a one, Dickon Greene. I'll hit from the shoulder and you do the same."

"Well, then, to go back. I told Mrs. Littleton that I couldn't go on her house

party and I told her also that the reason was a previous engagement to go picnicking with Cynthia Rainey up the river. Suppose Mrs. Littleton should check up on me. You could fix it so that Miss Rainey will understand?"

"That's easy. Go on!"

She leaned forward in her chair dwelling hungrily on his words.

"I named some other folks whom we intended to invite. I jotted those names down as soon as I left Mrs. Littleton—for fear I should forget them or get them twisted. Here are the names on this slip of paper."

"I'll have Cynthia get them by heart. You want us to ask these people on a picnic next week-end, then? It shall be done!"

"No, no, no!" cried Dickon. "I don't want one of them invited."

"I don't follow your drift. But go on."

It was pleasant to Dickon to have her throw away reserve and use her natural vocabulary with him; it proved the distance he had gone with her as nothing else could have proved it.

"This is the idea. The names I mentioned to Mrs. Littleton were all people I was sure she knew intimately. And when I finished with them it naturally occurred to her to make a compromise and ask some of us to her house party."

Mrs. William Rainey rose slowly from her chair and stood with one hand clasping the back of it.

"Dickon Greene!"

"To be so intimately received in Mrs. Littleton's house," said Dickon, "is equivalent to having the door of New York opened to one, don't you think? I don't speak of myself. It means very little to a man—we're asked about everywhere to fill in gaps—anything in a dress suit would do just as well, usually. With a girl it's different."

"Don't I know it? Haven't I seen them look at Cynthia as if she were a spider? But does Mrs. Littleton—"

"I think she'll include some of the names on that list. But there's only one name I'm sure of."

"Which is?"

"Cynthia Rainey."

Mrs. Rainey, pale with emotion, could only stare at him.

"And now I have to run along."

"Wait," said Mrs. Rainey, coming straight to him. "Mr. Greene, it looks to me as if we'd formed a partnership."

"Boosters for Cynthia. Exactly."

"The next time I see you we'll talk over the details of the partnership."

Neither of them smiled.

"Whenever you please," said Dickon.

They shook hands again, and he was gone.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. RAINNEY SMELLS DANGER.

THE moment he disappeared twenty years dropped from the shoulders of Mrs. Rainey. She gathered up her skirts with one hand, seized the French balustrade in the other, and raced up the stairs. One thump upon Cynthia's door and she bounced.

And this was the picture that met her eyes.

William Rainey sat on the side of his daughter's bed and she was propped high upon pillows, a dressing gown drawn around her shoulders; between them lay a writing pad of broad cardboard, and they were playing cribbage.

"Twenty-four," said William Rainey, so intent upon his game that he did not notice their spectator. "Twenty-four and a pair on you, Cynthia! Never play—"

"Thirty-one and three of a kind!" cried Cynthia, laying down a card triumphantly. "Six and two is eight!"

And she burst into happy laughter which went out suddenly as her lifted eyes struck the face of her mother.

"Dad!" she whispered in warning.

Her father turned with an exclamation of dismay.

"William!" pronounced Mrs. Rainey.

"My dear?" queried William Rainey, fiddling nervously with the cards.

"Did I tell you that Cynthia didn't get to bed last night until three o'clock?"

"You did."

"Did I tell you that she has to have her sleep if she's to keep her looks?"

"Now, Louie—"

"Louise, please, William. I'm no longer twenty."

He glared at her for an instant and then submitted.

"How's this?" he complained. "Have I a daughter or have I not? Do I get a chance to see her? I don't! Some yap-doodle is always here, and be damned to 'em all!"

He gathered up the cards slowly, his rage gathering with them.

"Who wanted to rush to New York, me or you?" asked Mrs. Rainey. "Who bolted straight for the big city as soon as he had a penny?"

William Rainey moved his lips, but could not speak.

"And who started this climbing stuff? Who began the talk about mounting the social ladder? It was you! You wanted to get into one of the good clubs—as if you didn't have a place to smoke your filthy cigars at home! And when you couldn't get in you began to curse New York and then you said you'd show 'em. But you've left the showing up to me. Do you want to take charge?"

"I'd drop it all," said William Rainey bitterly. "I say, it makes me sick to have my girl showed like a horse for a mob to bid on her."

"Dad!" protested Cynthia Rainey.

"Let him talk," said Mrs. Rainey, tapping her foot in a staccato on the floor. "Let him talk. But I'll handle the doing of things. Give up now? Not a hope, William Rainey. You got me into this, and now I'm going to go through with it. Where were we when I started with Cynthia? Nowhere! Where are we now? I'll tell!"

"Go on and tell," said William Rainey with more courage in his voice. "What has Cynthia got out of three months of work?"

"Three months?" echoed his wife.

"Well, it takes time to do things. A ground work has to be laid."

Her husband muttered to himself.

"And now I'll tell you where we are; if you can understand it! Cynthia!"

"Yes?" said the girl, shrinking a little from that hard, shrill voice.

"What's the best house in New York?"

"I—I—"

"Do you know or do you not?"

"Mrs. Baldwin-Dexter's," said Cynthia with as much emotion as a school child reciting a lesson. "And Mrs. Littleton's."

"And what's the longest step you could take?"

"To be asked to a small affair at one of their homes," answered Cynthia mechanically.

"Or to one of their country estates for a house party?"

"Mother," she said, her voice trembling, "are you going to ask that of me?" The weariness of a long effort clouded her eyes; she was not molded for strenuous work; there was none of the stern fiber of her father or mother in Cynthia, apparently. "Don't you know that they only ask girls they know intimately to their house parties? How can they take up with a woman they don't know and invite her to live with them even for a day?"

Mrs. Rainey's throat swelled with her triumph so that she could not speak for a moment, and her husband chose that luckless interval to growl: "Damned nonsense on the face of it, Louise! That'd mean that one of these gilded light-heads was sponsoring Cynthia; and they haven't brains enough to see that she's worth it."

"And that," said Mrs. Rainey, "is exactly what I've arranged!"

She enjoyed her triumph for an instant and then ran to the bed and caught both of Cynthia's hands.

"Oh, honey," she said, "it's too good to be true!"

"Where? Where? Where?" gasped the girl.

"Mrs. Littleton's country place."

"My God, Louise!" cried William Rainey. "Then you've won?"

"William, will you leave us alone for a moment?"

And he tiptoed from the room, too overcome to object.

Cynthia was rocking back and forth in the bed, her knees hugged close to her breast with both arms, and her eyes on fire.

"Mrs. Littleton's country place!" she whispered. "It's like a dream! Mother,

dear, you're wonderful! How did you do it?"

Mrs. Rainey composed her face. She had been the infallible power in that household so long that she attempted to take even this triumph calmly.

"A little finesse, my dear; a proper use of tools. Do you think I've done nothing but twiddle my thumbs all these three months?"

"But Mrs. Littleton hardly looked at me last night."

"Never mind how it was done; I used that new young man—Dickon Greene."

"Dickon Greene!" echoed Cynthia. "Mother, who is he?"

"Nobody," said Mrs. Rainey calmly. "Absolutely nobody. I had Laurette look him up and she had a terrible time getting on his track. Finally located him, and it turns out that he's been nothing but the teller of a bank!"

"But how can he do all these wonderful things? Think of all the people he brought to me last night! Godwin Sanders—"

"Brains, my dear," said Cynthia's mother, "will do a great many mysterious things. And he's got 'em. Cool young devil he is."

"And people don't know who he is?"

"People don't care what young men are, Cynthia, as long as they're clean—and amusing. He came to me just now to tell me that he'd arranged the invitation to Mrs. Littleton's."

The eyes of Cynthia widened a little. It was not anger or reproach, but a sort of frightened submission. She laid one slim hand against the base of her throat.

"Does that mean that he—I—" she faltered.

"It means nothing," said Mrs. Rainey with brusque decision, "except that Dickon Greene is hunting a fortune—and that he'll get one. He's too clever to fail, I know, but it doesn't at all mean that he'll get you, my dear. Dickon Greene? I laugh at the idea! Cynthia, he is merely the door opener who lets you into places where you want to go. When we're done with him we'll forget him!"

The brow of the girl puckered with pain.

"But does he think—" she began.

"No matter what he thinks," said Mrs. Rainey. "He thinks too much, anyway."

"But is it a sort of—bargain?"

"Not a word has passed that makes a contract, Cynthia. Do you think I'm fool enough for that? Not a bit of it! Nothing but hints." She chuckled. "Oh, he's a wise young fox, but he isn't done with me yet!"

"It's like—tricking him, isn't it?"

"Listen to me, Cynthia," said her mother, staring at the girl in alarm, "are you going to begin by pitying him?"

"I only meant—"

"Because if you do, that's the end of it. In three days he'll have you head over heels in love with him. Honey, thinking isn't your forte. Let me do your thinking for you."

"But how am I to act toward him?"

"Do your level best to be pleasant, Cynthia, but keep your hand on the reins. It isn't going to be hard to be pleasant to him. It's going to be a lot harder not to be *too* pleasant. And, mark my word, my dear, if he once gets started with you he'll take the bit between his teeth and run away with you."

"Oh!" said Cynthia.

"Now go to sleep."

"After this? I couldn't dream of it!"

"You will, though. Don't budge out of bed for two hours at least. Short hours of sleep are what take the bloom, Cynthia. I know."

And Cynthia submitted without a word while her mother drew the shades and darkened the room.

Going out she leaned over the bed and kissed the brow of her daughter. She herself had been very lovely in her girlhood, and when she looked at the white, beautiful face among the shadows on the pillow it gave her a little pang of sad happiness.

"Go to sleep, honey, and if you dream, dream about what you'll see at Mrs. Littleton's country place. You'll have the finest young men in the land to pick from, honey, and the hard thing will only be to pick the right one and the best of the lot."

"But it mustn't be Dickon Greene," murmured Cynthia, to get that point firmly fixed in her mind.

"Certainly not, goose. Not that he wouldn't give you a brilliant future, his brains and your money, Cynthia. But you don't have to stop at him. As your father says: 'The sky's the limit for you now!'"

She was still chuckling when she closed the door behind her. In the hall she found William Rainey pacing moodily up and down.

"What's wrong?" frowned Mrs. Rainey. "Hasn't enough happened to make you smile?"

"Louise," said her husband sternly, "d'you ever think that we're almost tricksters, one way of thinking?"

"William, you're plain foolish to-day."

"And breaking our hearts to marry Cynthia off to some wooden head with an old name!"

"What do you want?"

"I'll tell you what: I want some young fellow with good wide shoulders and a fighting jaw—like that fellow Greene. That's a man's face for you!"

"You, too!" said Mrs. Rainey. "That youngster is positively dangerous!"

Which proved that she had come through slightly different channels to the point of view which Mrs. Littleton already held.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ORDER OF BATTLE.

IT needed only the simplest mathematics to teach Dickon and William North that almost the last throw of the dice was the house party at Mrs. Littleton's. Even for the equipment for that last effort their means hardly sufficed.

It was known that there would very probably be a hunt while they were in the country, and it was above all things necessary that Dickon provide himself with a hunting outfit. For two whole days William North hunted; and on the end of the second day he came home despairing; but on the third day he found what he wanted—a suit at practically half price. To the purchase of that the bulk of their money went.

"But"—as William North said just before he started toward the train to go to the

estate, for Dickon was to follow later in Mrs. Littleton's automobile—"but, sir, when a ship goes into action it is always stripped for the battle. You'll go twice as far, sir, with empty pockets as you would with a few thousand in the bank."

Indeed, Dickon found that the wolf at the door was a sort of stimulant like a cocktail before dining; and of all the automobile load that journeyed out into the country Dickon was the cheeriest. What with forty miles an hour in the rough and sixty in the smooth going, it was not a long trip, and they were still in the heart of the sunny afternoon when they slid over the top of a hill and went whining through a huge gateway. A liveried servant stood beside those great wrought iron gates, done in fantastic scrolls.

"Cerberus," said Dickon, following a train of fanciful musing which he had started a few minutes before. "I should throw him an opiate in a cake, for yonder lies Hades and I have to whittle out Eurydice."

The machine was crunching the gravel up a winding driveway lined with elms—not those meager elms which are usual in planted estates, but sturdy old veterans whose branches met overhead so that Dickon found himself looking up at the sky through a Gothic lacework of intertwined boughs. Through the trees they caught glimpses of forest glades and open places, thickets and stretches of lawn, no doubt all planned by the landscape gardener, but done most realistically; half a dozen of those swiftly succeeding vistas were sufficient to brush away any thoughts of the city; one moment of that wind rustling in the trees above them banished the rattle of traffic. It carried even the cool mind of Dickon away from his conversation with the red-haired girl at his side, Geraldine Brooks.

And then they burst suddenly out of the woods and in full sight of the house. There was a pleasant green terrace of lawn in front of it, marked out with a stone balustrade, and above these rose the huge square façade of the house—red brick quoined with white stone which made a pleasant line against the sky, and made it seem a true Italian blue. The entrance was one of those rather flat, ample Tudor arches, deeply re-

cessed, and above it was a vast mullioned window of leaded glass. It was neither a very graceful nor a very stately front, but the house with its square lines and high shoulders gave Dickon an impression of spaciousness within.

It was not belying. William North met him in the hall, and leading the way toward their rooms Dickon glimpsed big vistas on either side of the hall, cool, bright apartments. His own room was almost as large as the living room of his New York apartment, and the ceiling even higher; the four-posted bed sat back in an alcove, quite obscured by hangings if one wished, and with the wide fireplace there was a stronger suggestion of a library than of sleeping quarters.

"So this is the battlefield?" said Dickon to the valet. "As a general, North, I don't think you could have done better."

"Not bad at all," assented North. "Though for my part, sir, these distinctly English manors are a bit jarring."

"Too stiff, eh?"

"Too un-American, sir."

There were any number of such surprises in the character of William North; it might be said that he was continually reaching out with his finger and tapping Dickon to call him to order.

"I have been talking with the servants," went on North methodically, "and I've tabulated what I learned."

He drew forth a slip of paper.

"There is much that may be done here, sir. Much! I shall not hide from you that I was worried before we came. One never knows what may be met with at the very best houses. I have a great respect for Mrs. Littleton, but even then I was in doubt. However, there are few flaws in the list of guests."

"Then run through 'em, North, and tell me what's what."

"Mary Doane," said the valet, "is a bit of an artist. Unexceptional family—old Virginia stock—comfortable means. Worth, I should say, a walk in the afternoon, and a bit of a chat about nature."

"Just note that down, will you?"

"I have it already opposite her name."

He went on: "Grace Ordway is rather

new, but very good. Her father distinguished himself in the diplomatic service, and his daughter has made her way very well; refused a very handsome title last year and could refuse a good many more this season. Quite athletic. You might play a set of tennis with her."

"I'm wretched at the game."

"Let her teach you the fine points, sir. Nothing they love more than to teach a man something, sir."

"Quite so."

"Nicholas Burney, the sportsman; but you've surely heard of him?"

"Connected with his racing stable, that's all."

"Quite enough, sir. A fairly good position, but not distinguished. You might accept one of his cigars after dinner and let him talk to you about the turf; very fond of talking, he is. Then, Louis Aldrich. Negligible. Pleasant, worth fifty millions, famous as a dancer and swimmer, hopelessly dull, sir. You can win his heart and secure an invitation for a cruise on his yacht by laughing at one of his jests. Gerladine Brooks—"

"I met her coming out."

"Good, sir. I hope you broke ground?"

"She seemed disposed to talk, I think."

"Excellent. A power, sir, and she will be more as time goes on. I would say that she is even worth a stroll in the evening."

"By all means. Next?"

"Godwin Sanders, you know, I believe? Nasty tongue, sir. It might be well to have little to do with him. Shortly after his arrival he will select one girl and pay all his attention to her. That is his practice and it will be well to never interfere; in her own circle his mother is czar and could damn you with a word."

"But if he becomes interested in Cynthia Rainey?"

"In that case, sir, it will be better to attack the enemy boldly and get at the root of the fire. Spike his guns with steady ridicule; he's not used to it and can't respond in sort. Grows angry, in short, and is helpless."

"Excellent!"

"Horace Loriston is a handsome giant passionately fond of exercise. You will

probably be the man next his size here and he will ask you to box with him. I believe you box very well?"

"Fairly well; rather out of practice."

"If you can strike him one telling blow he'll never forget it; no temper, but he loves a strong man, and he can repay you—one of the finest positions socially of any one here. To run along: Irving Johns is a round-faced, red-cheeked man not so simple as he looks. Belongs to the Philadelphia Johns, but he's as much at home in Paris and London as he is in his own city or New York. Has a secret passion for writing verse, I gathered from his man. Might be well for you to lead the subject to verse and endure his reading of his own poetry. Quite worth while, in fact. He is now working on a long ballad on King Harold and it would be wise to open with some talk about the Conquest."

"I'll have to read up on that stuff."

"I have already done so for you, sir."

"Bless you, North; you're infallible."

"Thank you, sir; I do my best. William Minter drives racing automobiles; also a hunter. You know the West, sir, and a little talk about riding and trails will be enough for him. He can do much for you, particularly with the older set—has hunted with a good many in Africa and other places. Next, considering Katherine Hampton, I should suggest a mild flirtation, carried on quite carelessly, sir."

"Charming, North," said Dickon dryly.

"You are better than a Sunday school lesson."

"Sunday schools are very well in their place, sir," answered William North severely, "but at present we are at Mrs. Littleton's."

"To be sure," said Dickon, subdued.

"The rest are hardly worth noting, I think, except two who are more important than all the rest: they are Sylvia Lock—"

"I forgot to tell you I had quite a chat with her at the ball."

The valet frowned.

"If you neglect to mention such important matters, sir, you will keep me quite at sea. Sylvia Lock is worth another chat, sir."

"And what lines shall I follow with her?"

"Treat her like a man, sir. She is one of those rare women under forty who have minds and she will respond to a bit of discussion of the proper tone. Socially, she will one day be another Mrs. Littleton—or even more because she has a better sense of humor. There is a touch of the Roman about Mrs. Littleton, sir, as you may have noted."

"I haven't, but I'll write it in red. Any more?"

"Most significant of all: James Vincent, your old acquaintance, sir."

"I think I know him."

William North started in manifest alarm.

"No, no, sir! No one knows James Vincent and no one ever will. I sometimes think he does not know himself from day to day. Concerning him I have only an humble suggestion to make, sir, and that is, caution, caution, caution!"

"I suppose you're right. I'll watch him."

"Without letting him know?"

"Without letting him know, then."

"Good. He likes to be considered a social trifler and a dictator of fashion. In reality he is much more."

"What, for instance?"

"That is what no one knows."

"And so," concluded North, "I hope you are prepared for the battle, sir?"

"Perfectly," murmured Dickon.

But his glance had wandered out the window and over the woods. Opposite his window the forest had been cleared away in a lane, a blind alley made solely to furnish a vista for a few windows in the house which opened on that side; mists of the late afternoon gathered across it, now, and tangled the strong green of the elm trees and the naked oaks in films of blue. Closer beneath the window stretched the Italian garden, delightfully formal, with paths of white gravel primly laid out, and smoothly fashioned hedges, and tossing heads of fountains, and shrubs carefully rounded, and bits of lawn scrupulously shaven.

"You are not unhappy, sir," said William North, stepping a little closer.

"Only thoughtful," said Dickon. "Do you see what money means, North?"

He was talking more to himself than to the valet.

"There's the forest cut away to give a perspective for a tired eye; and there's a bit of nature under us made formal for the sole sake of contrast with that wild wood across the way. Money did all that!"

He paused and dropped his chin upon his hand, scowling.

"But, sir?" suggested North.

"Why do you say that?"

"You infer another side to the picture, sir."

"Do I? Well, it's a business matter, North. Souls are comparatively cheap this year, eh?"

"What do you say, sir?"

"I say; if a man could sell his soul for something like this, wouldn't he be a fool not to make the bargain?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

CYNTHIA TASTES SUCCESS.

THE valet could not for a moment link that remark with the memory of Marie Guibert; for his own part he had dropped her out of his mind with a deep feeling of shame because he had ever closely connected the third master with the actress. Indeed, he did not worry long because the last words of Dickon were unintelligible; for he was beginning to pay his master the deepest compliment of which he was capable; he commenced to accept Dickon as a being of superior reach and not to be followed in his mental processes beyond a certain point.

This feeling of respect tinged with awe had been forcefully increased earlier in the day when he arrived and found that his master had been assigned by Mrs. Littleton to one of the finest guest rooms in the manor. He had not mentioned this fact to the master, for he began to feel that Dickon took such successes for granted; but he and the other body servants in the house had lost no time in making a thorough comparison of apartments. The result was one which enabled William North to hold his head high among the others. To be sure he looked upon the third master as to a certain extent a pupil—a child, almost—but he was such a pupil as Philip

found Alexander—with touches of genius which lifted him above North's sphere.

All that he gained out of this sentence of Dickon's was that the master would go a long way to have the wealth which meant such an establishment as this. In all of which North perfectly accorded with him. A gentleman to serve was the first requirement for his happiness, but next to that there was nothing more important than a goodly establishment. The Devening and Wentworth households had been fine ones, but they had never represented a tithe of what lay within the reach of the Rainey thirty millions. He began to see himself already in the position of a sort of tutelary deity of that mansion-to-be-built—an overpower which controlled the household mechanism. And though he observed that the master was sad as he sat at the window, looking over that exquisite landscape, he attributed the sadness to causes quite outside of his own ken.

The next high point for him during the day was to see that the room was kept in perfect quiet while the master enjoyed his afternoon nap; and after that he entered into the serious duty of getting Dickon ready for dinner. He felt a pride in turning out Dickon which he had never felt with Devening or Wentworth. Neither of his first two masters could compare with that virile, deep-chested figure on which no coat that was ever designed could disguise the muscular strength of the shoulders. There was the combined weight and litheness of the athlete in that form, and William North worked over him as an artist works over a masterpiece. It was a long task, for trousers and sleeves must not be pressed too sharply, yet sharply enough, and the waistcoat must drop with just sufficient freedom, and the shoes must be shined carefully, rather than ostentatiously; the knotting of the tie was in itself a work of art, and the observance of each pocket and its contents, to make sure that nothing bulged so far as to disarray important lines, was undertaken with the scrupulous care of a surveyor. But at last he could do no more, and even his grudging eye was contented. From his toes to his tie he pronounced Dickon perfect.

"Give me good luck," said Dickon at the door. "I'm going out to the big battle, North."

"A man must be born with clothes, he can acquire manners," said William North, "but with clothes it's another story. Mr. Greene, you needn't be ashamed this night."

A faint smile softened for a moment the lines of that dominant, gloomy face, and then Dickon went downstairs. He was hardly among the guests and through with the necessary introductions when Mrs. Littleton caught his eye and led him apart.

"You've taken me behind the lines, so to speak," she said, "and showed me your plan of battle. It's only your due that I should do what I can to help you along. I suppose you want to take Cynthia Rainey to dinner?"

"By no means," said Dickon.

"No?" She looked at him, half amused, half surprised. "What, then?"

"It would be almost too pointed, don't you think?" he answered. "You don't want James Vincent to think that his time is wasted, do you?"

She followed his slight gesture. Vincent sat cornered with Cynthia Rainey.

"Surely," said Dickon, "such efforts as those should have a reward."

Mrs. Littleton gasped. Her poise seemed utterly shattered by what she had seen.

"James Vincent!" she breathed, and just a tinge of color came up in her pallid cheeks. "You don't think that it means anything with him, do you?"

"Where Vincent is concerned," said Dickon, "I don't presume to think at all."

She eyed him with a new appreciation, smiling. One of her chief supports in her long war for social prestige was her ability to judge merits of newly rising stars on the horizon and make them hers as soon as they appeared; and as she looked at Dickon Greene, now, noting the cold eye and the clean, strong line of chin and nose, she decided upon the spot something which she had half admitted before—he was a rising force among them. Indeed, she wished that he might be, for he had maneuvered himself into such acceptance with her that it would be a blow to her if he did not "make good" elsewhere.

"But he hasn't looked at a girl seriously for ten years," she said, "and he's forty if he's a day—forty and more!"

"Years of ripe judgment," said Dickon quietly. "I really think he'd enjoy taking her to supper."

"Do you know that you're very generous?"

"I despise handicaps."

"Very well. You shall not lose greatly by the change."

And as the result of that simple maneuver Dickon had the pleasure of taking in Sylvia Lock, who of all the girls at the house party was by far the most significant. He had a double reason for wishing to go in with another than Cynthia, for in the first place he wished to judge her from a distance, from the viewpoint of the rest; and in the second place he did not wish to have the girl think he was dogging her steps. Undoubtedly her mother had already talked with her about him and talked a great deal; but just what Mrs. Rainey had said he was not at all sure. It would do no harm with Cynthia, in the meanwhile, if he spent most of his early time with others, and particularly if he could demonstrate that he was not altogether unacceptable to them.

As for Cynthia, she was getting on very well, indeed. She was not talking a great deal, but she was disregarding her mother's final solemn warning of absolute silence and smiles. By her side sat a consummate conversationalist who guided the stream of talk that came her way and turned and twisted it so that it was easy for Cynthia to appear even witty with Vincent as a foil. He left charming openings and let her make the obvious hits in such a manner that even Dickon was for a time puzzled. And the success flushed the girl, set that fire of starry happiness in her eyes which only comes with first successes. She was dressed in a jet-black gown with a high, square-cut neck and filmy sleeves. It was far too old for her—it would have done on a matron of forty-five—but indeed it was so far outside her range that it did not seem inappropriate. It shocked people into attention, and when they saw that blooming face, that slender, rounded arm, they forgot to criticize; for Mrs. Rainey had discovered, by

a great stroke of fortune, a modiste who was both obscure and a genius.

Dickon decided that she might well have more poise, and yet her open happiness was effective in its own way. Whenever any one spoke to her she met them two-thirds of the way with a bright smile and with eyes ready to be amused. It was like watching some lovely bird balancing on a sprig of greenery in the sun; one wanted to sit and look and say nothing. In fact, Dickon felt a smile of excitement begin to grow at the corners of his mouth and his heart beat leaped. She had not a jewel on the transparent hands, or on her wrists or her hair or her throat, but her hair was like pale gold, and when she raised her wine glass to touch the liquid with her lips it glowed against the black of her gown as she lifted it and flamed ruby-red against her throat. He could tell by the faint narrowing of James Vincent's eyes that that connoisseur had noted the picture and enjoyed every instant of it. His fine white head was canted a little to one side; and with a start Dickon recognized in the corners of his mouth that same subdued smile of excitement.

He remembered what the cynic himself had said at Silverman's on that wild night: "Chains of spider-web, but God, how they pull!"

And remembering that Dickon closed his eyes hard, banished the picture of the girl across the table from him, and turned resolutely to Sylvia Lock. She was talking in a low tone with that delicate modulation which only a woman of culture knows; there was a touch of delightful Southern softness to it; she had had a "darky mammy" she told him, when she was a child.

A new excitement grew on Dickon. The hum of talk came in upon him from all sides, threads of half a dozen conversations alternately hushed as some one struck a dominant tone for an instant, and then swelling again, talk of sports, and the hunt that was to come to-morrow morning. Far down the table sat Mrs. Littleton, alert, throwing in her weight when the talk lagged and bringing out the best in her guests; then listening with what William North said was the greatest of all social gifts.

Suddenly it came upon him that he was being very stupid with Sylvia Lock; her attention was beginning to wander; for some minutes past she had been sustaining the talk with him entirely out of her own resources. He made up his mind calmly to shut out the rest of the table by an effort of the will. He concentrated upon her, declared to himself that she was by far the finest partner of any at the table; and then, mysteriously, he was able to talk to her again. Her glances no longer wandered. She seemed to find a great deal worth interest in whatever he said, and now she was laughing and chatting with a heightened color.

"It is all a sort of hypnotism," said Dickon to himself, "and that's something worth remembering."

After dinner the crowd broke up into little groups. There were some in the music room, and others on the porch overlooking the Italian garden. Dickon strolled with Sylvia Lock around the terrace; and when they came in again they passed in the broad hall a group of which Cynthia was the obvious center. Horace Loriston was on one side of her, Loriston, black-haired, handsome, a giant, and she was laughing up to him when she saw Dickon. At once her mouth pinched in a little at the sides; her eyes widened, and the last notes of her laughter fell flat.

"Ah," said Dickon to himself, "something is decidedly wrong. Decidedly!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

POINT AND PARRY.

WHATEVER Mrs. Rainey had said to her daughter, he decided on the spot, it had been the wrong thing to say. He freed himself from Sylvia Lock at the first opportunity and got away by himself to think. One part of his plan was working perfectly, more perfectly than he had dared to dream: Cynthia was making a success. He had been able to tell that by the rather pinched smile of the other women at the dinner table—smiles of forced appreciation which was plain token that they felt she was taking more than

her share of attention. But that expression in Cynthia's face as he passed her was not all to his liking. She had looked at him as she might have looked at the skeleton at the feast. He concluded that she felt she owed all this to him, that he would eventually demand payment. It was the thought of that payment which had altered her so suddenly.

There was only one thing to be done and that was to get her away from the crowd and talk to her for a moment seriously. And it was no easy thing to draw her from the others. When he found her it was in the music room, where Katherine Hampton was singing ballads. The singing proved his salvation, for it enabled him to take a chair close behind her. Godwin Sanders, sleek, pale, handsome, was near by watching Cynthia with half insolent appreciation; closer still James Vincent turned in his chair and fixed upon Dickon a look of singular, grave attention. What did James Vincent know? If he guessed even a scruple of the truth there would be in Dickon's way a stumbling block of the first order. But he was able to lean forward in the midst of the applause at the end of a song and whisper to Cynthia: "I wish I could speak to you alone for a moment. Do you object?"

She tossed her head about quickly, smiling; but when she saw him the smile went out.

"Of course," she said, and rose too hurriedly not to attract attention.

"She obeys me as if I were her father," thought Dickon, biting his lips, and as he followed her out of the room he noticed the eyes of James Vincent, narrowed, as he watched them go.

"Where shall we go?" he asked, when they reached the hall.

"Wherever you wish," she said meekly, and did not raise her eyes from the floor.

There was little of her color left; she was plainly frightened at the thought of that interview, but she acted as if she dared not refuse.

"Suppose we stroll out to the Italian garden?" said Dickon.

He saw her shiver a little, but she started on obediently at his side, and they went through the side entrance, tall and narrow,

as some medieval portal, and down the semicircular steps of stone toward the garden.

It was larger than it had seemed from his high window that afternoon; they had no sooner passed the first hedge than the house was shut from view behind them—there was only the dark, rolling woodland far across the slope.

"Suppose we sit here," suggested Dickon.

It was one of those hedge-inclosed patterns with a fountain tossing in the middle of it, so high that its head caught the lights from the house and sparkled like silver as it nodded and rose and fell, shaken out a bit to 'one side now and then when the breeze freshened, and the spray rushed across the pool, at such times, with a burst of louder whispering.

"Yes," she answered, and sat down without a glance around her, her hands folded in her lap and her eyes on her hands. It made Dickon writhe with shame to look at her; there was both pity and self-contempt and deep irritation as he watched her submissiveness.

It was a marble seat with a broad, high, gracefully curving back. He sat down and rested against the farther end of it, and while he lighted his cigarette he noted that she relaxed a little, as if in appreciation of the distance he kept. In his anger he snapped the lighted match away. It made a tiny arch of red and went out before it struck the lawn.

"Beginnings are always hard, aren't they?" he suggested.

For a moment she continued to stare before her, and then the silence gradually told her that he had spoken. She started and jerked her head toward him.

"Yes," said the girl in hardly more than a whisper.

He blew the ashes from his cigarette and studied the glowing coal in thought; and she took advantage of that interim to glance quickly, sidewise; it was a relentless profile that she saw, she thought. Stories which she had heard slipped back into her mind as they had been doing all the evening. There were many tales about men involved ever so slightly with women, men who used their advantages without scruple. Fortune-

hunters, they were, and with as little mercy as the pirates of the Spanish Main. The dying glow from the cigarette showed at last only the line of the strong, bony knuckles.

He felt her tenseness, and perhaps he guessed very largely at what was going through her mind.

"When I passed you in the hall," he said again, "you remember?"

"No."

"You were talking with Vincent and Loriston, you know."

He watched her raise her hand covertly and press it against the base of her throat; there was a lump there, he guessed.

"Yes."

"You looked at me oddly, I thought."

Steps approached them, and she turned her head toward them and he saw the faint glimmer of her eyes in that half light increase; but the steps veered away and her head fell again.

"I had no intention of doing that," murmured Cynthia.

"I suppose you hadn't, but the odd look was there, nevertheless."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish you would not talk like that!" he broke out.

She shrank from him a little, watching him, and it curdled his blood as though he had struck her.

"What have I said?"

"Nothing," he answered, his shame making his voice gruff. "But I'll tell you what. I'm going to say a good many things to you. For Heaven's sake don't be alarmed!"

Her fear, his precarious position on the verge of losing all hold upon her, excited, stimulated him; he came naturally to one of his characteristic maneuvers, rash and cunning in its rashness. She already knew a great deal by inference and from her mother. Why not let her see that he was keeping nothing from her? Set her free from all obligation; let James Vincent have an equal start with him, and then race the race out on its merits? It made him sit straighter on the seat merely to think of it.

"Before you came down here I suppose you had a talk with your mother?"

She had been leaning back against the

stone, and now he saw a subtle change in her attitude, a loosening and flowing of lines. Did she think that he was going to propose to her on the spot? He wished, fiercely, that he could wring the neck of Mrs. Rainey.

"Yes," said the girl again.

"Will you tell me exactly what she told you?"

Her lips moved, but no sound came.

"I'll make it easier for you, even if it's a bit hard on me. I'll tell you what she said."

He paused, weighed the chances, looked clear into what he should say, and then plunged ahead.

"In the first place I want you to understand that I'm not a sentimental sort of chap," said Dickon. "You'll keep that in mind, won't you?"

"Yes," whispered the girl. Those two deadly monosyllables kept hammering at him, crushing him. Every time he heard one of them he almost forgot what he should say next. But he took a deep breath and went ahead:

"It's important to keep that in mind so that you can understand. In a word, I've gone through a hard path in my life and I determined on a change. And that's why I made up my mind firmly to do what your mother told you I intend to do"—he paused and then brought out the words harshly—"marry money!"

She did not answer, but her hands slipped together and were clasped tightly. She was bracing herself for the shock.

"That's sufficiently frank—brutally frank, in fact. She told you that and she told you the truth.

"But let's go back a ways. I made up my mind with perfect definiteness that I should get a fortune in that way, and my mind is still fixed—as adamant."

He heard her breath taken sharply.

"I fixed on a definite fortune—it was yours."

He had brought out the three blows one after the other. This last one only made her quiver; her head raised and then dropped again.

"There had to be something given in return, and I found what could be given and

gave it. I think it's clear that I lived up to my half of the bargain."

He saw that he had gone as far as was possible. In another moment she would be either hysterical or else up on her feet defying him. So he changed swiftly.

"I kept that firmly in mind; I've gone steadily ahead on that track; this house party is a goal that I've worked for with patience. And so it came to to-night and I saw you across the table from me; I was thinking of the thirty-million-dollar William Rainey estate—not of you!"

She had turned her head in a sudden hope; but Dickon was prepared for that, and looking steadily at the ground he went on, lowering his voice to a monotone: "I was thinking of the money and then something happened—I don't know what—I think it was when you raised your wine glass, and it was like a great ruby against your throat."

He paused skillfully. There must be time for that picture to sink into her mind.

"And you laughed," mused Dickon. "It was a lovely picture!"

He turned suddenly upon her, but she did not shrink. It brought their heads closer and her eyes were great and bright and looked at him without wincing.

"I saw then," he said quietly, "that I couldn't go ahead with the plan. I looked up and down the table and I saw a dozen fine fellows, clean faces, clean hearts under them, and every man of them worshiping you with his eyes; and all at once it made me sick to think that you were to pass from hand to hand like a bill of exchange, all because your mother has social ambitions. It made me sick, and I'm still sick with the thought of it. When I passed you in the hall you were laughing and when you saw me your laughter went out like a snuffed candle."

He made another of those significant pauses and in it he heard the swift, soft taking of her breath.

"That's why I had to ask you to come out here with me, because I had to tell you that the thing's done—ended. You understand? God knows I'm hard, but this is the hardest thing I've ever done—telling you the truth about myself. I'll tell you why

it's hard: because women like you don't come in groups. They come one by one—one in a million. It's like cutting my throat to let you see what I am—well, it's done, and the good of it is that you're free to go ahead your own way."

He stood up.

"I guess that's all. Shall we go in?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE EAVESDROPPER.

BUT she made no move to rise. She sat between him and the fountain, and the head of the fountain was silver and her head was pale, pale gold, glimmering. Her face was a white outline with a beauty to be guessed at, not seen.

"I wish you'd sit down again," she said.

He obeyed and sat looking straight before him—straight before him, but staring into her mind. When she spoke her voice was a marvelously light music, it seemed to Dickon, almost lost in the rushing of the fountain.

"You've talked so frankly to me," she said, "that I have to talk frankly back to you. I want you to know that I'm ashamed—oh, sick at heart, not for you, but for myself. You see, it isn't all mother. It's more I myself. I've been just hungering to come to places like this and be among people who aren't all—edges, you know. I thought I would do anything to get here. I knew there was a bargain made; and I didn't care. Anything seemed worth while."

She sighed.

"You see, I'm not at all what you thought."

"I see that you're a child," he said suddenly. "But go on."

"I've only this to say to you, Dickon Greene. I'm gladder than I can say that we've had this talk and that the bargain doesn't exist any more, but I'd be still happier if you'd shake hands with me and say that we can start all over again—as friends."

"Do you mean that? After you know me?"

"It's because I *do* know you, better than you think, Dickon. I know what being poor

is. You see, there were years and years when we hadn't a thing, hardly, and I've craved money so hard that I ached with it. I would have done anything for it, I guess. Then we got all those millions suddenly, as if they were dropped on us, and I found out that money couldn't buy a great deal outside of clothes, you know. So even with the money I've wanted something more, and only to-night the hollow place was filled. Here at Mrs. Littleton's the people have pleasant voices and pleasant ways and they know how to look at you without staring, and how to talk to you without being personal. It's been like music to me, every minute. And no matter what you have said, I shall not forget that I owe it all to you; every bit! And so—we shall be friends, shall we not?"

Her hand was stretched toward him.

"Do you wish it, really?" said Dickon.

"Really!"

"And you won't look at me to-morrow when I'm talking to some girl and say: 'She must be rich?'"

"No, no! Because, you see, you're a great deal better than you think."

He bowed his head and raised her fingers to his lips; but he was seeing in his mind of minds the face of Mary Gilbert, and it was her hand he touched.

"We must go in. I'm keeping you from a good many who are counting minutes."

And going back she took his arm.

"Do you know something?" she said softly as they came close to the house.

"Yes."

"I feel ten times stronger."

"And why?"

"Because I have a friend at my back now."

He left her in the music room and went back onto the terrace; the air was thickening and the morrow might be a rainy day for the hunt; in his heart there was a cold, quiet feeling of triumph.

"I've trumped your ace, Mr. Vincent," he muttered aloud. "And the hands are now evenly matched."

He had a definite purpose in leaving her as soon as she was back in the house, for in the first place it would give her a chance to think and that would be all to his ad-

vantage. In the second place, she had come back with him into the music room with her face lighted—and James Vincent, from his corner, had watched her with a look of infinite concern. He would be worried, put out of his stride, so to speak, and made anxious. That again would tell for Dickon. On a stone seat by the balustrade he sat down to think, adding his chances with methodic care. On his side there was the girl's sense of gratitude to him because he had made this entrance into society possible; there was still more a respect for his ability, since he had so far maneuvered with such success; and, above all, was the sudden exposé of his plans which had the double effect of shocking her into a real interest because it showed her that he was treating her as men treat each other, but it also improved his position so that no one could ever come behind his back. Nothing that she could discover about him now, his obscure family, his past life, could possibly injure him in her eyes. And on the side of James Vincent, if it were really true that the cynic had at last become seriously interested in a girl, there were equal strengths. He had behind him a fortune so large that he could never be accused of making an alliance for business reasons; his family was both old and distinguished; his relations with celebrated people were intimate and of long standing, and above all there was about his name an atmosphere of admiration, power, and a trace of suspicion which gave point to the man. To win James Vincent was to achieve a triumph which would hold the social world breathless; and indeed the very prospect of that victory was enough to startle the girl into love for him. He saw that she was a singular mixture of hard-headed aspiration, for all her apparent softness, with an underlying nature of pure femininity, tender, true-hearted, genuine. But she had established a goal toward which she yearned earnestly. A marriage with James Vincent meant the immediate attainment of the end she most wished; a marriage with Dickon Greene would mean a step in advance, indeed, but it would also mean a long prolongation of the struggle. To oppose the wealth, position, celebrity and singularity of the con-

nisseur there would be only the adroitness of Dickon Greene, social adventurer.

"Decidedly," thought Dickon in the end, "if I have given myself a fighting chance by that scene in the garden, I have done little more, and I must continue to take every trick which is played—at least, for a time."

All this, however, might be a crossing of bridges which did not exist; the interest of James Vincent might be nothing more than a casual attraction. So Dickon pushed the thought out of his mind and James Vincent with it.

Some one in the music room was playing Chopin, a stormy étude that called Dickon's attention to the scene beyond the terrace. Partially screening the bench where he sat was a bushy evergreen hardly taller than a man's shoulder, but it served to cut away the view of the house, and it left Dickon almost alone with what he saw. Somewhere behind the mist of the night there was a young moon, and by its light he saw the clouds, blown very low, drifting over the woodland, brushing the very tops of the trees. Yet close to the ground there was not a breath of air. It made Dickon feel a sense of excitement, as though great things were about to overtake him. Very much as one feels at sea, looking at the dark curtain of the squall which runs over the ocean soon to strike and stagger the ship, though now there is bright sun above it.

Sometimes the clouds split away and showed the immense depth of blue-black sky beyond, that indescribable color of night and distance; and again the gap was closed by a great tumultuous rushing which looked like thunder made visible; and all as silently as the drift of shadow across a window pane.

He had no idea how long he had been sitting there when two voices broke in upon him from men who were walking up and down the terrace. They spoke emphatically, but in controlled voices, and Dickon made out the tones of William North and James Vincent.

It was North whom he heard first say: "In all deference to your opinion, sir, I must violently disagree. I hold it in every sense unfitting."

"Nevertheless," said Vincent, "I am seriously considering it."

"I pray that you will think twice, sir."

"I shall, North, if you advise it."

"Sir, it would be a most unfortunate misstep, I assure you. It is my confident opinion."

Dickon unconsciously grew tense; there was a vague fear that Vincent had drawn the valet into his confidence; he brushed the thought away.

"But," said Vincent, "the one-buttoned type is much in use, and very well considered."

Dickon shut his teeth hard to keep from breaking into noisy laughter.

"Much in use," said the valet with emotion. "I am profoundly sorry to admit, sir, that you are right. But so were hoop skirts, at a time; and to my eyes the hoop skirt itself is no more offensive than the one-button morning coat."

There was a pause.

"H-m!" said Vincent. "I am glad that I have this chance to talk the matter over with you, North. Your opinion in matters of dress I have always held second only to the judgment of Lord Ainsley, though I fear that he erred more often on the side of radicalism than you do on the side of conservatism."

"Sir, I am proud to hear you say this. I may remark, however, that Lord Ainsley's much admired—and justly admired—taste, seems to me unfounded upon a strong principle."

"So? You surprise me. And what is your own principle, North?"

"Repose, sir."

"Good! A Grecian idea, I would say."

"Perhaps, sir."

"Returning to the one-button morning coat, I can't help feeling that there is a certain freshness about it—devilish cheerful, you know, to see a man stepping along in such a coat."

"Dashing, I admit, but hardly in tone. Observe that it is impossible for a coat to be fastened by only one button without making a line of unpleasant tension, so that it is apt to draw toward the button both from above and below if the garment is fitted at all snugly."

"I think there's something in that."

"I am sure of it, sir. Furthermore, there

is an exaggeration about such a coat that calls the public eye. I, sir, would as soon appear on Broadway in my bathrobe as in a one-button morning coat. I would feel the vulgar eye too familiarly fixed on me!"

There was a brief pause during which Dickon shrewdly guessed that Vincent was controlling a desire to laugh. Decidedly, the smooth fellow was being particularly amiable with North for a purpose.

"That's a bit strong," said Vincent.

"My feelings on the matter may have carried me away, sir. Yet I will venture to say that though you have contemplated wearing one of these coats, yet you have never actually appeared in public in one."

"I admit that you're right there. I've tried them on a dozen times, at least. I have even had a pair of them tailored for me. But when I came to slipping into one of them for the morning something always held me back by a thread."

"The power of innate fine taste," said William North solemnly. "I knew it would be this way."

"As a matter of fact," said Vincent, "you have convinced me."

"It is a compliment to be allowed to make a suggestion to Mr. Vincent, sir."

"Tush, North. I consider you a criterion, and I always have. You will never know how close I came to making business approaches to you after the death of my friend Devening. But my man Tom is so damned headstrong that he would never get on with another fellow in the house, particularly one of your talents, North."

"Thank you, sir. I know him very well."

"So, so. But infernally set in his ways. By jove, I grow positively restless, but I can't imagine life without Tom."

"Personally, sir, I always make it a point to establish a fixed routine."

"I suppose so. I can already see the effects of it in Mr. Greene. I noticed he was very well turned out to-night."

"You are very kind, sir. Mr. Devening was a continual trial, but Mr. Greene is extremely simple, sir."

"I'm glad you get on well with him. By the way, I was rather surprised when you left the Devenings. Their household has never been the same since you went away."

"A step which I regretted, sir, but which was unfortunately imperative."

"I think I understand. You went straight to Mr. Greene from them?"

Dickon listened anxiously to the pumping.

"No, sir. We met quite by chance."

Dickon could have laughed at the consummate adroitness of Vincent.

"Very odd. Met by chance, eh?"

"Under unusual circumstances, sir, which made it clear to me at once that I had met my third master."

Dickon sighed with relief; for there was a pause which showed that Vincent had been checkmated.

He said at last: "I am heartily glad for your sake, North. He is a man of talent."

"Extraordinary, sir!"

There was an emphasis in this which warmed Dickon's heart.

"In fact, I think he will go far, socially."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I say, I think he will do well and rise considerably in the social world, North."

"Rise, sir?"

"Why not?"

"There must be a mistake. It is obviously not a question of rising with Mr. Greene, but simply of being recognized."

Again Dickon came within an ace of chuckling. Under the questions of Vincent he sensed a subtle rapier play of which honest William North was obviously quite unaware, yet the valet had brushed aside every vital stroke with his bludgeon of downrightness.

"Ah, yes, I see," said Vincent, coming back to the attack from a different angle, as though he hoped to turn the enemy's flank. "I see, he comes from some very old and dignified family, eh, North? Connections so eminent that they have only to be recognized to take the social world by storm? By the way, what is his tree, the family tree of which he told you, North?"

"He told me of none, sir."

"Not of his family? Why, North, I'm surprised. I thought you were most particular in such matters of service."

"I have only one great standard by which I judge my masters," said North quietly.

(To be concluded NEXT WEEK.)

"And Mr. Greene measures up to it?"

"Better, sir, than any one whom I have served before."

"That's infernally interesting. Will you tell me what that standard may be?"

For all the assumed carelessness of Vincent's tone, Dickon caught an undercurrent of tenseness, as if the connoisseur felt that he were approaching the crux of the inquiry. Unquestionably something had happened that night which made him eager to place Dickon Green exactly; probably that something had to do with Cynthia Rainey.

"I shall be glad to tell you, sir, though I'm surprised that you ask. It is a simple thing, but it escapes definition: Gentility."

A certain guilty depression overtook Dickon as it always did when he heard the valet broach this subject. He felt, always, as if he had been wearing a mask in the presence of William North.

"Indefinable, indeed," answered Vincent, his voice altered. "And if Dickon Greene is in every sense of the word, you are to be congratulated, North, profoundly."

"Indeed," said North, "I have been not unhappy in his service."

"And your plan to gain eminence for Mr. Greene is simply to let him be seen?"

If there were any sting of irony in the astute voice of James Vincent it passed William North by.

"You may have observed, Mr. Vincent," he said, "that so far he has not been altogether without success."

"True, North," said Vincent, and there was such a freshening of his voice that Dickon knew he had given up the attempt to pump William North of any more news concerning his third master. "True; and unless I'm mistaken, he will continue."

"Thank you, sir. Is there anything else of which you wish to speak with me, sir?"

"Nothing, North. The morning coat was all. Thank you, very much."

"A pleasure, Mr. Vincent. Subject to Mr. Greene, I hope you will always consider me at your command, sir."

"Very good of you. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

The step of William North passed away.



House that Anne Built

By LYON MEARSON

JAMES HENRY HARRINGTON cast a rueful glance at his check book, adding up his balance mentally with no trace of satisfaction.

"Sixty-five dollars' rent—each and every month; now, how in the name of the good St. Patrick can a fellow make any headway against that?" he growled ill-temperedly.

"Oh, Jimmy boy, that's the catch in it—you can't," Anne smiled soberly, with a thoughtful gleam in her nice brown eyes, absently running her fingers through his blond hair.

"You see," went on James Henry, "it's the rent that's really holding us back. It's more than any fifty-dollar-a-week man ought to pay—more than we have any right to pay. And—"

"And it's really getting us nowhere," Anne added. "It's not like paying off installments on books, or furniture, or Liberty bonds, where there's an end to it some time, and where you eventually get something for your money. It's something like

throwing bricks into a quagmire—you throw and you throw and you throw and—"

"Enough!" declared James Henry.

"And you throw," went on Anne regardless, "and the sixty-five dollars—I mean the bricks—sink out of sight, but you never come anywhere near filling it up. It's like that man we studied about in Greek mythology who was always rolling a heavy rock uphill, and just as soon as it got near the top it rolled down again, and he had to pay his rent all over again—I mean he had to roll it up again, and when it got to the top again it rolled down again and—"

"Enough, chatterbox!" interrupted her husband, seizing her around the waist and making her stop by the simple expedient of placing his lips on hers. A short interlude.

"But I don't really know what we can do, old girl," he added after a while. "Every time we look for a cheaper apartment they have gone up—by golly, pretty soon you'll have to give 'em your right eye as first payment on the rent of a two-room

and kitchenette. Gee, I wish we had a house all our own somewhere in the suburbs. You know, Anne, I used to laugh at these commuting birds down at our place, but they had the right dope at that. They own their homes by now, most of them—while the landlord's birthday comes around every month for us. And when you figure what everything costs these darn days, in addition to rent, why—" He wound up in silence.

Anne was thoughtful for a space. He had given her an idea.

"It would be nice to live in your own little house, wouldn't it, Jimmy boy?" she said softly at last. "With flower boxes in the windows and—"

"And the front and back porches tastefully decorated here and there with mortgages and liens," he laughed. "Snap out of it, old kid. How're we ever going to get a house when we can't save a nickel and are lucky not to be running into debt? Why—"

"But other people do it, Jimmy. There's Milly Stifert and her husband—I'm sure he doesn't make any more than you and—"

"But they did it long ago, when prices were a great deal less," James Henry interrupted. "Nowadays—"

II.

THE next evening Anne pulled out a handful of clippings and settled herself comfortably on the arm of James Henry's chair. "Listen to this," she commanded, and read from one of the clippings:

"WHY PAY RENT

when you can own your own home forty minutes from Grand Central Station. Seven rooms, fireplace, two baths, sun parlor; all modern improvements; plot 100x150; a small payment in cash and the rest on easy terms, like rent, will buy this for you, if you act at once."

She let it flutter to his lap and picked up another. "Don't be a slave to your landlord," she declaimed, and continued:

"All you need is a little cash to buy the prettiest hollow tile and stucco semi-bungalow in Westchester County, with a view of the

Hudson River from your front porch; golfing and tennis, yacht club, with privilege of membership, on property; every imaginable improvement; six rooms, fireplace, garden; trains every half hour; pay balance on easy terms less than rent.

"Doesn't that sound like the dearest little house you ever saw, Jimmy boy," she said. "There are lots of others that seem just as good." She indicated the handful of clipped advertisements she held.

"You glorious little fool!" he laughed. "Don't you realize that the 'little cash payment' probably amounts to about ten times what we have in the bank—how much have we, anyway?"

"Two hundred and fifty-three dollars and thirty cents," she answered.

"Yes, precisely," he said. "And the 'balance like rent' is O. K., too, if you've been accustomed to paying rent for one of those gold-plated apartments on the Drive where the rent sounds more like a telephone number than a sum of money." Her face, which had lighted up beautifully as she was reading the advertisements, fell, and he hastened to add:

"But there, there, kid, maybe it isn't so bad as all that. We might be able to find a place at that—we'll look, anyway." He patted her arm.

"Sure we'll look," she smiled. "There must be a home for us somewhere. Oh, Jimmy, I'm homesick for our little house already, with a little white doorway and flowers at the windows, and lilacs, and a tender green lawn and the train just pulling in 'five minutes walk from the house,' as some of the ads say, and you hurrying in from the city all full of bundles, and a fireplace, and everything."

He drew her down on his lap and she snuggled just under his shoulder blade, where she fitted nicely.

"We'll go around Sunday and give some of them the once over, Anne," he said. "It'll do you good to get out into the country, anyway."

III.

THEY went Sunday and found it was just as James Henry had forecast. After spending about five dollars on railroad fare

—not having commutation tickets they had to pay many times the commuters' rate—they found many beautiful little houses. Some were of wood and some of stone, some of brick and some of stucco; all were within easy reach of the station—but none were within easy reach of the Harringtons. The smallest cash payment anybody asked was one thousand dollars; the smallest monthly payments were one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Prices ranged from ten thousand dollars upwards, mostly upwards.

"Looks like we're just simply outa luck, Anne," smiled her husband. "They're not for the likes av us, with our little old fifty dollars a week." She nodded assent, but there was a gleam in her eye with which he was familiar. Two years of married life had made him conversant with all the signs, and he knew that expression. It meant determination, and it also meant an idea.

"Next Sunday," she announced, "we'll go again."

During the week Anne forsook her house-work for several days and did a little hunting on her own hook, without mentioning the matter to her lord and master, as he is slangily called with no regard for the truth. Evidently she found what she was after, for when the following Sunday rolled around in its due course she took charge of the proceedings and piloted James Henry to a suburb on the Hudson with an apparent familiarity as to their destination.

James Henry said nothing, preferring to let matters take their course. He knew that when the time came she would tell him what it was all about—that she would give him a chance to compromise with her by agreeing with what she proposed—the usual feminine idea of a compromise.

"Now, where?" he asked, when they alighted from the little station at Laurel Manor.

"You'll see," she said mysteriously. "Just come along, like a good little boy, and don't be sassy to mamma."

Her destination was more than the usual five minutes' walk from the station—it was a good fifteen minutes. On the edge of the development she stopped in front of a little, weatherbeaten bungalow.

"There!" she said, with a magnificent

gesture, as one who says: "My estate is as far as the eye can reach."

"There what?" he asked, stupidly, gazing at the rusty brown of the old house. It couldn't be that she had picked this place!

"There's the house," she said, "stupid! We're going to buy it."

He looked at her in wonder, and then looked back at the house. It was not a pretty sight, with its tumble down picket fence in the last stages of decay, its front yard overgrown with weeds, and its small doorway porch caved in from fatigue and the elements. The shutters—yes, it had shutters—hung mostly from one hinge, when they hung at all. Around the edifice was a general air of decay and decomposition that indicated it had not been inhabited for some time, and the general impression given was that it did not belong in this smart settlement of fashionable little homes and nice people.

"For Heaven's sake, Anne!" James Henry protested. "What makes you think we can live in that kennel?" He turned to her in bewilderment. She returned his gaze calmly.

"Well, can you buy a better looking place?" she inquired.

"No, but—"

"But nothing. Here's a place we can buy—with our means. The reason we can buy it is because it is the way it is—tumble down and old. But the wood is good—it is strongly built—except for that porch—and when you get done fixing it up, painting, clearing the grounds—it is on a seventy-five by a hundred-foot plot—you'll have a house on your hands that you would hardly exchange for any in Laurel Manor—gee, don't you just love that name, Jimmy boy; Laurel Manor, the home of the Harringtons!" She paused, spellbound.

"Use your head, Jimmy," she added. "Can't you see the way this place will look with a little of the proper kind of attention?"

He was silent.

"Oh, how dumb men are!" she exclaimed. "I can see it already; a little Colonial doorway with a brass knocker in place of that ugly old porch—a trim green

hedge in place of the fence, new paint, flowers, fireplace—there is a fireplace, Jimmy—shutters fixed. Oh, Jimmy!" She seized his arm in ecstasy.

He regarded her doubtfully, but yielded to her enthusiasm. "Let's go in and give it the double O," he said. "I suppose you have the key."

It looked better inside than outside, although it was sadly in need of paint. The wood was heavy, the roof was weatherproof, and the house was wired for electricity, had gas connection, running water, and every modern improvement in reason—all this because the homestead was located on improved property belonging to a great real estate development company. He felt better about it after inspecting the inside.

"How much?" he asked laconically, after a thorough appraisal.

"Fifty-five hundred, Jimmy."

"How do they want it?"

"Five hundred down, two mortgages, first for thirty-five hundred and second for fifteen hundred. Second mortgage to be paid off by monthly payments, like rent. It will run for a year, and then will probably be renewed until paid off. Six per cent on both mortgages."

"But we haven't got five hundred dollars, Anne," he protested. "We have two hundred and fifty berries in the bank, and no chance of getting any more."

"Well," she said, "I figure that to get things started we need that and about five hundred dollars more. You can borrow five hundred dollars on your insurance and—"

"Borrow on my insurance—I should say not!" he interrupted. "Why—"

"James Henry!" she broke in. "Do you want to spend the rest of your life working for some old profiteer of a landlord when by a little extra effort you can shake loose from all landlords and become owner of your own little house in the country? Your insurance isn't much good to you now, anyway—not for about fifteen years, or until you die. And in the meantime you can make it work for you—you have an investment there; it's like money in the bank."

They discussed the matter pro and con, and finally he compromised—as exclusively

outlined in a previous portion of this chronicle—by doing what she wanted him to do. He shrugged his shoulders finally and gave in, as always.

IV.

It turned out to be rather a heavy burden for a man who was only making fifty dollars a week. James Henry Harrington, his wife had to admit, loving husband though he was, had something lacking in his makeup. For want of a better name, his wife mentally denominated it as push—this thing that he lacked—but it was not quite that. He lacked, perhaps, the proper inspiration to get ahead, to make money.

For several years he had been city salesman for a large drug house; his territory was the Bronx, a large territory, and not specially lucrative to him. For selling the output of his firm he received a drawing account of fifty dollars a week, to apply against commissions. That is, nominally. In actual fact his commissions seldom mounted to that figure, but they were high enough for the house to be satisfied that they were not losing money on him. There were other salesmen—some of them in territory not considered as good as his, who were making more. James Henry never understood the reason very well—he considered he worked as hard as his job warranted. The reason for it was—that these men worked *harder* than their jobs warranted. It's an old business axiom that the man who never does any more than he is paid for never gets paid for any more than he does; that held true for Harrington.

His wife recognized this; and when they went over the figures incidental to their new house, they both recognized the fact that it was going to be a long, uphill push with no letup until at least the second mortgage was paid off. Then things would be a little easier.

According to the terms of the agreement, the Harringtons were to pay the previous owner fifty-five dollars a month. This would dispose of interest and leave a balance of twenty-five dollars a month to be paid on the second mortgage. They figured

that about fifteen dollars a month more would go for taxes, water rents, coal—which of course they had not needed in their city apartment—and incidentals. So their carrying charges were about seventy dollars a month, five more than they had been paying. In addition to this James Henry's commutation to the city cost eight fifty per month—five dollars more than he had to pay for car fare in the city. It was going to be hard.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said, as they went over their figures one evening. "You know, we Americans eat too much anyway—and a heavy meal in the middle of the day slows you up in the afternoon. Suppose you make up a couple of sandwiches every morning and I'll stick them in my pocket; I'll drop into an armchair lunch and get a cup of coffee. That'll be quite a saving, won't it, Anne?"

"It sure would indeed, Jimmy boy," replied Anne, "but are you sure that a couple of sandwiches will be enough for you for—"

"Sure thing, kid. Anyway, we need the money," he smiled, and seizing her with pretended roughness, kissed her in the vicinity of her left ear.

No neighbor called for a few weeks after their advent in Laurel Manor, and this was rather a relief to them than otherwise, because many changes were going on, both internally and externally. In the first place, Anne got in touch with a local carpenter at once. In consideration of receiving the lumber from the old porch—some of which was good—and fifty dollars, he made for their house a pretty Colonial doorway, with arch top and two shining white stone steps.

"My, you'd hardly know the old home," ejaculated James Henry when he came home on the evening the job was completed. "Looks much better already—needs a coat of paint, though."

"It's goin' to get it, too, me lord," said Anne, "and the whole rest of the house, too."

"Oh, I say—we can't afford that now—it costs like sin to have painters around," he protested.

"Oh, that's all right," said Anne non-

chalantly. "Your vacation begins next week, doesn't it? Well, you're goin' to paint it," she announced. "You always were handy at such things."

"Oh, but I don't think I could paint a house, silly."

"My boy, you never can tell what you'll be able to do—until you try. You might be specially gifted in that direction. You're goin' to paint this house."

And it was even so. The house was painted a dazzling white by James Henry; and the doorway became a beautiful green, the same as the low, gently sloping roof, under his loving care. The shutters, which he fixed up, became the same lovely shade. Really, the house began to take on quite a distinctive appearance. Especially so after the obnoxious picket fence was peremptorily removed and a young hedge planted in its place.

The land was painstakingly cleared by the young couple, and with the help of a gardener of the neighborhood who was glad of a little extra money, was sodded, and a garden started in the rear of the little bungalow. Two giant flower pots appeared at each side of the little green Colonial door, and every window had its window box of gayly colored flowers. A shiny brass knocker hung in the exact mathematical center of the door. At the side of the door they placed a white settee which they had picked up cheaply.

The transformation was amazing. It is almost miraculous, the change a judicious use of paint and gray matter can make in the appearance of a house. The interior underwent much the same sort of treatment. The floors were carefully scrubbed, and then James Henry covered them with shellac, so that in future all that was necessary to keep them clean was an oil mop. He painted the walls and woodwork—and in the living room, bedroom, and dining room it was necessary to use wall paper; these were the only places inside the house where the services of a professional painter became necessary—and as the season was not very busy they managed to get him reasonably.

All this made inroads on their little capital, however, and pretty soon James Henry

discovered that his bank account did not exist any longer except in name.

V.

THE next week was mainly distinguished by a call from their nearest neighbors, the Billy Wenzells. They could hardly be blamed for not having called at first—the house had hardly looked as if it could hold people worth calling on. In its present shape, however, it had begun to take on a decidedly interesting appearance; in fact, far more interesting than James Henry's bank account.

The Harringtons found the Wenzells pleasant to talk to, and cordial in their invitation to be friends with them, and it was no great time before they were calling each other by their first names. In the same length of time, also, the Harringtons found that they would have a merry time of it, financially, if they tried to keep up with their neighbors. The Wenzells had an automobile—it was no Rolls-Royce, yet neither was it a fliv.

"She told me the name of the woman who does her washing and ironing, Jimmy," confided Anne a day or two later. "Says she could get her to come to us, too. They charge four dollars a day around here."

"Well, I suppose you have to have her, Anne," agreed her husband. "Go to it."

He saw, though, that his income was not going to keep up with his outgo. This being the case, there is only one thing a man can do—make more income. Something newer and keener entered into James Henry Harrington when he looked at his pretty little bungalow and discovered that he would have to "scratch gravel" pretty fast in order to continue living in it. A more competitive spirit—a desire for more business, and through more business, more money.

He went after business harder. The Bronx is a great big territory, and it takes determination and persistence to cover it properly. James Henry had never tried to cover it completely before this—he had done about enough business to warrant his retention by his firm, and no more. He cast this behind him now; he had some-

thing to work for. In fact, more than he had figured on, as he discovered an evening or two later when he arrived home and found Anne in a flutter of excitement.

"What do you think, Jimmy-boy?" she told him. "We've been invited by the Wenzells to the yacht club dance—next week."

"O. K.," he said. "Fine. Nice people, aren't they?"

"You bet they are," she replied enthusiastically. "I'll have to get a dress."

He stopped dead still. "A dress! For the lova Pete, kid—we're in no financial condition to buy dresses now. Why—" He stopped suddenly when he saw her face fall piteously.

"Oh, Jimmy! And I did so want to go—all the best people of Laurel Manor will be there. Can't you buy me a dress—just a little one, Jimmy, dear?" She snuggled up to him and he was a lost husband.

"Well, I suppose we'll make the grade some way," he conceded. "Where you going for it?"

"Oh, you dear boy!" She aimed a kiss in his general direction. "I am going to Jane Wenzell's dressmaker."

He did not regret the money when he saw her in the outfit a few days later. It was a filmy affair of white silk and lace, with a bodice of old rose and—oh, what's the use, no poor simp of a male writer can really hope to describe that creation intelligibly. Anyway, it was a dream of a dress, showing gleaming white shoulders that James Henry was sure would be the envy of every other woman in Laurel Manor.

"Jee-min-ee!" he gasped. "You look stunning, Anne! By Allah! How—how much is—the—er—damage?"

"Ninety-five dollars!" There was an almost embarrassed silence.

"Ninety-five—iron—men!" he said finally. "Anne, that cleans us out, do you know it?"

"Sure." She nodded happily. "I know it. But you can make more," she declared confidently. "What's the good of a husband if he can't buy his only wife a decent rag once in a while?" She puckered her adorable lips at him impudently.

After she had retired, though, he went over his accounts and moneys rather anxiously. It was costing far more than they had figured on to keep up this house. In addition to his regular payments he found that his table cost him much more—about ten dollars a week more than it had cost in the city. Anne explained this by the fact that she could not shop around as had been possible in the city—and groceries, meats, and fresh vegetables cost more in this exclusive suburb. He shook his head apprehensively.

He went after his customers doggedly the next day. He was like a bulldog—he never let go. They had to give him orders, if only to get rid of him. He got orders from druggists he would never have been able to approach in the old days. But he wasn't taking no for an answer now. He needed money.

It was not very long before this began to show in his returns. His employers noticed the change in him. He had found that it was not so hard to get business as it had once seemed to him. And then came a day when he found sixty dollars in his envelope instead of the usual fifty.

"Boss," he asked the salesmanager, "is this a raise—or only a mistake?"

"It's a raise, Jim," answered his chief, "and I hope to the Lord it isn't a mistake, because it was done on my recommendation. You're going much better now—since you bought that house of yours, I guess. Seems to have steadied you down. Keep it up and you'll get somewhere."

He thought over the matter with satisfaction. So that was the way it was done? If you needed more money you just simply went out and got it—it was as simple as that! Perhaps he would be able to save the whole ten dollars a week extra—act as if they didn't have it.

There was jubilation in the castle of the Harringtons that night. This jubilation lasted until the first of the month—two days later. Then Harrington discovered that he would not be able to save his ten dollars extra. Anne presented him with a sheaf of bills that made his head swim. Hats, shirtwaists, housedresses, under-whats-nots, stockings, *et cetera*.

"One hundred and ten dollars!" He looked at her, half dozed and half puzzled. "For Heaven's sake, Anne—what are you trying to do, bankrupt us?"

"Oh, Jimmy, I did need things so badly—and I thought now that you were making more money we could afford it. You know, Jane Wenzell dresses so well that I simply have to be a little careful about my appearance—you know, for your sake, Jimmy, just as well as for mine. You don't want your little wife lookin' like a freak, do you?"

He groaned and turned his attention to the bills, finally making out a check for the amount and giving it to her. The next day he went at his work with a fierce spirit that surprised even himself. He saw that he was going to have a pretty time of it keeping ahead of his expenses.

VI.

THAT'S about the way things went for James Henry Harrington during that year. Every time he thought he was going to get a little ahead of the game he was confronted with a batch of bills that was enough to make his head swim.

This was a new side to the character of Anne that had never disclosed itself to him. It was a question of "Keeping Up with the Wenzells," and she saw to it that they kept up. If Jane Wenzell got a new dress, Anne got one; if Jane got a new hat, or a coat, or a suit, Anne was not happy until she got one, too. He had never known his wife like this. She had been frugal and careful, but their new estate in life seemed to change all that.

He hesitated to speak of the matter to her, recognizing the fact that she had had none too easy a time of it with him, but these constant expenditures were draining him of all his resources. She was so happy and care-free in her spending that he could hardly bear to call a halt on her; she seemed to him like a butterfly that had lately been released from its cocoon and was celebrating the event by an orgy of flight, testing its wings at dizzy heights. And yet he felt that he must mention the subject.

"You know, Anne," he said one evening

after he had been raised to seventy-five dollars a week and had seen his bills go up correspondingly, "I like to see you happy, but—" He paused a little uncertainly.

"But what, old stick-in-the-mud?" she pouted.

"I don't like to seem to complain, but it does seem to me that with my increased salary we ought to be able to save a little and—"

"Oh, you're perfectly right, Jimmy-boy," she smiled back at him. "I know I'm an awful expense to you." She went to him and laid her head on his shoulder. "I'm goin' to try to be good from now on, Jimmy darling," she whispered. "No more new clothes, no more new anything—we'll save our money."

She looked up at him sadly. "Life is so hard, isn't it?" she whispered with the hint of a smile in her eyes.

"Well, that's all right, kid," he said brusquely. "I don't mean you're to stop buying clothes altogether—just go a little easy."

And so it was left, and her good resolutions lasted nearly a week—until Jane Wenzell bought another new dress. So did Anne—and he gave up the struggle with a sigh, resigning himself to plugging hard at his job. She was just like all of them, he decided—a giddy butterfly, and his business was to scratch around and dig up enough for her to fly with.

The next week a magnificent old grandfather clock appeared in the living room—Anne had picked it up at an auction. He had to give her a check for a hundred and twenty-five dollars to pay for it—he knew nothing about such things, but supposed it was the bargain she enthusiastically said it was—that is, if you did not need your money so badly for other things.

The year rolled to its conclusion, and with it came a fine new job for James Henry. His employers had noted carefully the change in him; he had become a man of substance, with a house of his own—a man who justified the salary they paid him. He was now their star salesman. And then the sales manager decided to go into business for himself.

The job of sales manager was given to

James Henry—he was now head and shoulders above the rest of the force, driven to it by the extravagance of a wife whom he had never previously suspected of a lust for spending money. The salary was a hundred dollars a week, and there was a bonus connected with it, depending upon the amount of yearly business, that would certainly mean a check for twenty-five hundred dollars at the end of the twelve months.

There was a happy time that night in their home. Things were at last veering around in the general direction of the Harringtons. Of course, they were financially almost on the same footing as they were last year at this time—that is, they had practically no money in the bank—but now perhaps he would be able to keep ahead of her.

The next day a TNT shell was exploded right in their living room. James Henry came home gravely, with something on his mind. He said nothing about it until after dinner. Then he told her.

"I met the agent of the real estate company to-night," he said. "You know the second mortgage is due next week."

"But they're going to renew it, aren't they?" she asked. "You know, they told us they would."

"I know," he said, "but things haven't turned out well for them. They need money. How much have we paid off on that darn mortgage?"

She made a rapid calculation at twenty-five dollars a month.

"Three hundred dollars—that leaves twelve hundred," she announced in a moment.

"Exactly. He says that under ordinary circumstances they would have renewed the mortgage, but they need money so badly that they are willing to make concessions to get it, and if we pay it off next week he'll give us a satisfaction of mortgage for one thousand dollars."

"And if we don't—" she began.

"They'll foreclose. That means we'll lose the house." He bent his head on his hand for a moment, and she was silent. This house meant a great deal to them now—it was a little gem in its setting, as different from its pristine appearance as home

brew is from three star. It was home. And yet—where could they get a thousand dollars? He could not ask for it at the office—right after this new job had been given to him because he had seemed so substantial to them.

He could hardly prevent the disloyal thought from creeping into his mind that if Anne had been less extravagant they might have saved even more than the necessary sum. As it was—

"It does seem as though we might have saved a little, Anne—with the money I've made this year. Mind, I'm not blaming you—it's as much my fault as it is yours; more, probably, but—"

"You poor, dear boy!" She was on his lap in an instant. "Burdened with such a selfish, extravagant wife." Her arm tightened around his neck.

"There, there! That's all right, old kid," he said, patting her on the shoulder.

She looked up.

"You say we'll lose the house if we don't satisfy this mortgage?"

"Absolutely," he made reply. "He says they'll positively foreclose."

She rose from his lap.

"You wait here for a minute, Jimmy," she said soberly. "I'll show you something."

She went out, and a few minutes later returned with a small book in her hands.

"Do you see this?" she said.

"Yep—looks like a bank book," he answered.

She handed it to him. "Look inside and see what it says—in red."

"Why—why—Anne," he stuttered in his wonder and amazement, "there's a balance of eleven hundred and thirty dollars!"

"You bet your sweet life there is!" she announced. "That's what we've saved this year."

"Saved this year!" he ejaculated. "Why, you're crazy with the heat, Anne—"

"You heard me," she said calmly.

"How?" he asked.

"Well, listen and learn something. You think I've been extravagant, don't you? Don't answer—I know you do. Did you ever really manage to save anything in your life? No!" she answered her own question

and went rapidly on: "I know that, and I knew that unless I took matters into my own hands we never would. Jimmy, how many dresses did I buy this past year?"

He made a rapid calculation.

"Six," he said, "and darn expensive ones, I'll tell the world."

"Wrong!" she said. "As usual. I bought one—just one. You paid for six, you mean. The other five were just made over—by yours truly—and cost nothing except a bit of extra material here and there. I would never have been able to get away with it with some men—or with a woman—but you never noticed these things very closely, anyway. For instance, do you remember that first dress—the one I wore to the yacht club dance?" He nodded in dumb astonishment. "Well, that was made from my wedding dress. I didn't buy but one hat the whole year—though you paid for eight expensive ones. I made them all over from old ones. I bought no new stockings, no new underwear, scarcely anything new—but you kept on paying. I presented you with the bills—and you had to hustle out and dig up the money—as I knew you would if I made you. You're a dear boy, Jimmy, but you're so pleasant and easy-going that I knew you would not make more money unless it was absolutely imperative. That grandfather clock, Jimmy"—she motioned to it, ticking away gravely in its corner—"I picked up at an auction for exactly thirty bones—you paid me a hundred and twenty-five; pretty good profit. Jimmy, how much do you think you paid the washwoman this year?"

"Four dollars a week—fifty weeks—two hundred dollars," he said.

"That's what you paid her—behold, the washwoman! That's me!" He would have protested at this, but she shut him off. "Oh, it was good for me, Jimmy-boy—keeps the waist line down, y'know, ole thing. I didn't mind—and the neighbors never found out any more than you did. And I saved a great deal on table and household expenses—you thought it was very expensive living here. I suppose it wasn't very honorable, if you look at it in one way, keeping all this a secret from you, Jimmy—but I did love our little home so,

and I knew we would never be able to keep it if I didn't do something like this, so—"

There was a lump in his throat as he gathered her into his arms.

"You splendid little woman, you!" he managed to murmur. "What a beast I was to misjudge you so! Not to know—"

"Oh, Jimmy, dear, it wasn't your fault—men are just naturally dumb-bells about women," she smiled, and he seized her again.

They were a little more rational later, as they sat on the settee in front of their little home, in the midsummer moonlight.

"You know what you've done, Anne?" he asked. "You've boosted me into a good job—and into my own home."

"Our own home," she corrected him.

"Oh, Jimmy-boy, I love every nail in it."

"I don't wonder, Anne—you built it with your own hands and your own brain. I love it, too—and the capable little person who made it possible." She sighed with happiness and patted the potted plant at the doorside tenderly.

"Our own home, Jimmy," she said softly. "Our own home."



The Gun-Fanner

By KENNETH PERKINS

Author of "The Fear-Sway," "The Blood-Call," "The Bull-Dogger," etc.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE HERD GROWLS.

A N hour before sunset Cal Triggers and the girl reached the big divide through which cut the western entrance to Sulphur Cañon. As they climbed

the ascent and got their first view of the gorge, the sound of the moving herd had increased so that now it was a continual rumble which swelled with a nerve-racking insistence. It was like the sound that a drummer makes when rubbing a wetted finger over the vellum head of a kettle

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drum. The sound dulled the brain and at the same time excited the nerves. Cal felt a crushing sense of danger as he trotted his horse into the dark gorge.

When he saw the bowl-shaped cañon into which he was about to enter, and observed that the entrance was only a small opening which could easily be guarded by a single rider, he realized that he might be walking into a trap. If he had been alone he would not have taken the chance under any consideration. It was not bravery but foolhardiness.

He pulled in his mount and took the reins of the girl from her. She made no protest of any sort because of the bewildering thunder of the herd. Why her captor had brought her so near a point of certain danger she did not know, although, she argued, it may have been because he had given up. Thirst, hunger, the sun, the mirages, the desert, had defeated him. This was the girl's conclusion, and it was very near to the truth. She looked up into Cal's face and saw the first flicker of indecision that had come over him since the beginning of their long wanderings.

"Why are you stopping here?" she asked.

Before answering, Cal looked into her face. "How are you feeling? Are you hungry? Are you feeling exhausted?"

"An outlaw abducting a woman does not worry about such things," the girl answered.

"You *are* exhausted. You couldn't ride another mile without something to bear you up."

"I'm in your hands. If I fainted with hunger what difference would it make to you?"

"Then you are about to faint with hunger! I'll make a confession to you. I have no more food. I have no more water. I'm up against what you warned me of—when we first started in on our ride. The desert's beat me—as it beats every one. The sheriff and Hazen and the rest have just been waiting for me to weaken in my fight—not my fight against them, but against the desert. They've let the sun and the blistering heat of the cañons back there do their fighting for them. And I'll tell you out and out,

that I've just about lost. But understand this first—it's not the sheriff that has beat me—nor Hazen nor Meakin—"

"Then you're giving yourself up by going in here?" the girl asked.

"I don't know. I've got to go in to see if that mucker was straight when he told me where I could get food. It's a desperate chance, but I've got to take it. As soon as I enter that little shake barn there I'll know whether I've been tricked or not."

"If you were alone what would you do?" the girl asked.

"I'd stay in the desert and be damned first!"

"It's for me then you're going in here?"

Cal pressed his mount over to the girl, and tried to read a meaning into her words by staring intently at her upturned face. He had no answer to her question, although he tried hard to say something. Instead he could only swear to himself, his face flushing hotly. When she returned his gaze he dug his heels into his horse's flanks, cantering off and leading her mount by the reins.

But Nan knew the answer to her question, and she thought over it from then on. This man—a prospector—who could probably stand days of hunger and thirst in the desert, had come back into what looked like a certain trap. And this he had done so that the woman who was his captive could be refreshed with food and drink.

"After all, there might not be food there," Nan said as they galloped into the cañon.

"Where that ore crusher is there is water," Cal returned. "At least we'll get some of this alkali dust out of our throats."

Cal stopped when he saw that ore crusher and a thought came to him. He resolved to play safe and to enter the shack with the supposition that a trap had really been set for him. There was no necessity, he concluded, of riding past the ore crusher where there might be a snipe shooter ready to drop him. He circled the creek bed, giving this hiding place a berth of a hundred yards.

Reaching the shack he dismounted with the girl and advanced toward the door, walking one of the horses before him as a

shield. When with gun drawn he reached the shack he banged the door open. For a moment he stood peering into the opening until his eyes dilated to the dark room, and then entered, leading the girl by the hand.

The musty little room still retained the heat of the desert day. Its odors were the odors of an unventilated but forsaken kitchen. Some odds and ends of cowhide, bits of dusty harness, frying pans thick with black grease, a bar of borax soap, were all that remained of the outfit. A single glance showed Cal that there was no food—or signs of it except the pots and a few empty cans.

This was the answer to all of Cal Triggers's doubts, and the moment that his eye had circled the room he knew he was trapped. At the same instant the door frame darkened; Cal turned, felt the dull, hard stab of a pistol barrel. He found himself facing the quiet, suave, triumphant Saul Meakin.

"Keep calm, Mr. Triggers," Meakin said with a genial note. "You have to raise your arm to fire. All I have to do is to tighten my finger. Now open the palm of your hand so I can hear your gun clattering on the boards."

Cal obeyed. "You've got a lot of nerve, Meakin. But how do you know you won't start the herd out there stampeding if you fire that gat?"

Meakin paled. It was not from fear. It seemed more like the white heat of anger. The girl saw the narrowing eyes, the tightening of the upper lip, and from pure horror at the look on Meakin's face she rushed frantically in between the two men. "You aren't going to commit this murder right before my very eyes!" she cried.

"It's for your sake!" Meakin shot back, raising his voice out of its suave coolness.

"Then if it's for my sake, don't do this horrible thing! I'll hate the very thought of you for the rest of my life!"

Meakin looked down at her. The very feeling of the girl throwing herself at him had complicated the murder that was in his thoughts. He stood motionless it seemed for a long interminable period, while the herd outside which had begun to mill, beat up a slow thunder of sound.

Saul Meakin, looking into the girl's eyes, saw something there which he had not bargained for. She was actually pleading for the life of the gunfighter, and in her look—if not in her voice—there was the tragic mark of a woman pleading for something she loves. A change had come over Nan which Meakin sensed—a change which the girl herself was not aware of.

The tense forearm to which Nan was clinging—the arm which held the gun—relaxed. The girl—as if it were merely the strength of that murderous arm which had sustained her weight—sank to the floor.

"We may decide this thing some other way," Meakin said. "I want you to understand that I am a fair man."

CHAPTER XXIII.

MEAKIN PLAYS FAIR.

AT the lower end of the cañon the herd was still churning up its clouds. Scrub Hazen, who had taken charge, saw that the steers, tortured with the thirst which the long ride over the alkali desert had kindled, had no intention of bedding that night. As soon as the vanguard had been swung about on the bedground the whole mass followed, circled, and formed what the cattlemen most feared—a mill.

"Now we're in for a nice slice of hell," Scrub said to his punchers. When the night horses were brought up he warned his men to keep in their saddles. "A few of them locoed steers are eager to eat somebody up, and it's good-by to any cow dog as they catch on foot."

The chow cart, the cook, the day horses and such of the men as were allowed to rest during the evening, were posted in a little barranca a half a mile from the opening of the cañon, where they were in comparative safety from drags. But this issue held nothing of importance for Scrub Hazen. He was concerned with two things of much graver meaning than the personal danger of a few of his herders: the milling herd and the little drama a half a mile further up in the center of the cañon. Death was fermenting in both of these scenes.

Scrub Hazen circled the big mill of

brutes, trotting his horse on the sand, loping over the patches of rattleweed and sage, but walking the mount slowly when he traversed the big rockslabs, fearing that the striking of the hoofs would further excite the steers. He passed one cow-puncher after another, instructing each one to sing. This more than anything else would prevent a sudden noise frightening the herd—and Scrub expected a sudden noise at any moment from the direction of the shack in the cañon.

The old cowman rounded the western edge of the herd, circled the bluffs which kept the mass from warping upwards toward the north, and by pressing his horse through the dense clouds of alkali, came around, entering the cañon. Then it was that a sound struck his ear. Scrub, well versed in cow psychology, detected the ominous note of that sound, and he knew that a disaster was coming. The herd having slowed in its milling, had commenced to make that indescribable mutter, partly a moo, partly a snarl which cowboys call "growling."

Scrub dug into his horse, covering the wavelets of sand at the cañon's mouth with a few bounds. He reined in carefully as his mount struck the lava bed, and rode up to the first night herder he met. "Keep them cow brutes milling!" he cried. "If you don't you'll find yourself squashed on the rocks like a horned toad which a dray has rid over!"

His face ashen with the new dread, Scrub rode to the next herder and to the next. But it was a futile ride. By the time he had circled again to the eastern side, he noticed that a marked difference had taken place in the milling. It was so slow that it could scarcely be called milling at all.

While this herd madness was beginning to clutch the great sea of brutes at the mouth of the cañon, the meeting of the girl, Cal Triggers and Saul Meakin was approaching its own climax in the little shake barn in the middle of the cañon bed.

Cal Triggers, disarmed, stood at one end of the little room, his tall-peaked sombrero brushing the cobwebs of the rafters.

The girl, having come out of her swoon, was helped to a little box chair by Saul

Meakin. The latter stood in the doorway, his revolver replaced in the holster of which the flap was left unbuttoned.

The churning thunder at the lower end of the cañon died down and then stopped suddenly so that the three were left in a tense silence. The light of sunset coming over Saul Meakin's shoulders reddened the gloom of the little hut.

Meakin saw clearly—as any man could have seen in that situation—that he was about to irrevocably lose the girl. If he killed Triggers there in cold blood, and before her eyes, he could not hope for another chance with her. The situation now was much more complex. Something had grown up in the girl's heart during her travels with the gun fighter; and Meakin, although convinced that this could not possibly be love—was not so blind as to overlook it. The game he decided to play was masterful—if a game can be called masterful which is at once cunning and cowardly.

"Mr. Triggers," he said, "you are trapped. If you don't think I myself am powerful enough to trap you, then let me awaken you to a few facts. Perhaps I am not powerful enough, Mr. Triggers. Mind you, I am not a boastful man, and I don't intend to boast now. With a gun in my hand—yes, I have you. But then great as the power of a six-gun is, I find it is as impossible to pull on you—as impossible as if I had a paralyzed trigger finger! And it is paralyzed. The girl here has paralyzed it. If she had stuck a needle into it and stopped the muscles and the nerves with a drug, it could not be more helpless than it is after I have seen the look on her face." Meakin, discovering the new light in Cal's eyes, hastened to warn him. "But it's only for the moment, Mr. Triggers. If you do not want to consider me as the winner—if you think I am good enough to trap you, then turn this over in your mind. There are men outside waiting to kill you as soon as you step out of that door. If they fail, the sheriff and his posse are waiting. Scrub Hazen and his herders are waiting—all ready with their six-guns to shoot you on sight."

"Then why should I be wasting my time talking to you, Meakin?" Cal asked.

"Tell me what your game is or else fight. I'll fight you here and now—I am not afraid of your greasy six-gun."

"My game is this: a dozen men are waiting ready and eager to lynch you—for stealing Hazen's horses and for stealing this girl. I believe I have it in my power to free you."

"You say—you can—free him?" the girl cried, bewildered. "Will you do that—you?"

"Of course I will not free you as an act of friendship," Meakin said. "I am looking for my own particular gain."

"Which is what, Meakin?" Triggers asked laconically.

"I have had a certain amount of chance before to win this girl. You, Triggers, have come into my place. It appears to me—just on a moment's glance which can't be counted on too surely—that any chance I had with her has been snapped up by you. You came into town as if to shoot the place up. The townspeople hid their heads with fear. You show yourself to be a great man with great physical power. You bulldoze them into letting you enter the rodeo. You win—I will admit that. Then—taking it for granted that the girl really had given her word that she would herself be the prize of the rodeo—you think you have a claim on her. You go to her ranch and abduct her—which is a romantic thing to do. Nan Harvess is a girl with a nature which I have been given to understand is very romantic indeed. She likes the idea of a knight on horseback riding into town, winning, striking fear, taking what he wants—which happens to be the prettiest girl."

"Are you trying to build up in my mind the idea that Nan Harvess is in love with me?"

"Not necessarily in love with you. But you have won enough ground so that I can consider you my rival." Meakin turned to the girl. "Is that right or am I—"

"What is your game?" the girl interrupted.

"I want Cal Triggers here to withdraw. That's what my game is. If he withdraws and promises never to molest you again, and if you say to me fairly that you will give me a chance and let everything be just

as it was before the rodeo—then I will free him."

"What power have you to free him?" the girl asked, almost belligerently. "You say there are a dozen men ready to lynch him, surrounding this hut."

"I have a power over some of them. There is a way of escape from the others."

"You have not asked me my answer," Cal said, coming from around the table.

"The girl is making this bargain," Meakin said hotly.

"Damned if she is! I am the one to make it, and before I consent to give her up to you—just to save my own hide—I'll rot in hell!"

The girl took Cal's arm as he stepped forward, his fists clenched. "No! No! You must not fight! You can't fight!" she cried desperately. "You must go!"

Saul Meakin had stepped back to the door. He again took out his six-gun, covered Cal, and with the other hand beckoned to his two henchmen who were waiting outside for the signal.

"These two men," Meakin said, turning to Cal, "will take you to the eastern end of the cañon, put you on your horse, and wait until they see you disappear across the little divide. If you are without food for the desert ride they will stake you. You will have your horse, your food, your water flask. The only thing you will not have is your gun."

"If you do this, I swear by God that I will come back," Triggers said.

"Your word has nothing to do with this bargain. It is up to the girl. If she gives her word that she will keep you out of her life then I am satisfied."

"What will you do when he comes back?" the girl asked trenchantly.

"I won't let that fear come into the bargain," Meakin said. "It's up to you to answer."

"But aren't you thinking at all of what will happen afterward?" Nan stepped up to Meakin and looked into his eyes. "Is this an honest offer? Are you really freeing Triggers?"

"Why, of course I am."

"Isn't there some one posted there at the upper end of the cañon? Aren't you

sending Cal into the hands of Sheriff Pickering or some one else?"

"Why, of course not," Meakin answered quickly. "Pickering and the rest are with the herd. That is why you'd better make up your mind in a hurry. They're coming up here any minute."

"If it's a true offer you're making—very well, I consent. This man will have nothing more to do with my life."

"Very well, then." Meakin turned to his two henchmen. "As far as the stone gateway, men, at the upper gate of the cañon. He will hold his hands up all the way, and don't let him mount his horse until he gets past the gate. Ride alongside of him until you get there, then give him his food, his water, his horse and let him go."

"You aren't bargaining with me, Meakin," Triggers said. "You remember that."

"I'll remember," Meakin said with a surprising composure. "As far as the stone gate, men."

When Cal, with upraised arms, was led out into the sunset there was not a sound from the thousands of steers at the lower end of the cañon. As Meakin watched him walking into the hands of the sheriff, who was hiding at the upper end of the cañon, he realized that the whole scene had suddenly been wrapped in a deathlike and ominous silence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"THINKING STEER."

AT the lower end of the cañon the clouds had subsided; a fine curtain of what remained of the alkali dust had lifted and moved out into the desert, deeply tinged by the sunset. Through this same veil the sun appeared as if poised in the act of rolling across the horizon mesas.

The mist curtain, upon lifting, showed for the first time the vast extent of Scrub Hazen's herd. It was a sea of backs and withers like a sea of brown waves, except that there was no longer any undulation. Every back, every pair of horns, was poised, suddenly congealed with fear. Herd-madness had spread to the outermost limits so

that the whole mass was now of one mind—a mind ridden with one dread.

What that dread was no cowman in the world could guess. It was a slow paroxysm of fear which had worked up—starting perhaps with the noise of the rodeo after the long drive on the range. Then the physical tortures of the desert drive had fanned it. Thirst had maddened them. The alkali tortured them. Each steer had stumbled blindly on, fleeing from it knew not what: fleeing the steer behind it, fleeing the dreaded horsemen, fleeing the red dust, fleeing the sun.

And at this moment had come the stage which preceded disaster. They were afraid to move.

The herders who had at first tried to calm them by their singing saw that their very voices frightened the nearest steers. Whenever a cowboy raised his song the herd warped inward, starting a movement something like an undulation, which waved across the further limit of the sea. One by one the cowboys stopped. The milling had stopped with the singing, and the horsemen reined in their mounts, afraid that the sound of a rock kicked up might start a panic.

And the steers were waiting for just such a sound. They all stood facing in one direction, their heads lowered, like angry bulls that are about to charge, their huge withers and necks as taut as rusty iron, their eyes rolling and watching for a move of the cow-brute on either side—watching without daring to turn the head. Thus they stood, every one facing toward the middle of the cañon, waiting for the slightest signal to bolt.

Oblivious of this imminent danger, the girl and Saul Meakin stood by the door of the little hut watching Cal Triggers being taken a prisoner to the upper end of the cañon, where the sheriff awaited him. Before they had led him halfway across the bed of the creek, Nan turned to Meakin with a curious look. "A doubt seems to come to my mind," she said, "about this thing you have done."

"What do you doubt?" Meakin asked.
"Haven't I done the fair thing?"

Nan studied him for a moment, and the

frank smile on his face reassured her. "It is the fair thing, except for—"

"Except for what?"

"Except for yourself. You are not fair to yourself. You had Cal Triggers where you wanted him. If you had killed him you would not have been punished."

"Then do you think I lost my nerve—and was afraid to fire?"

"No, I don't think that. I think instead of losing your nerve you showed yourself a very brave man. By letting Cal Triggers go you proved yourself a far braver man than if you had killed him. You must have known he would come back some day—and kill you."

Meakin's smile broadened and he laughed softly. "I am not afraid of him."

"And that is the doubt that entered my mind," the girl put in quickly. "Your not being afraid of his coming back makes me think you did not really free him. You were making a bid for my admiration."

"Of course I was! I admitted that!" Meakin returned, a new tone hardening his voice. "Everything I have done has been because of my love for you. I would have killed the gunman on sight—you know that. You saw yourself it was the thing for me to do. Instead I freed him for your sake. I could see that something about this man had taken hold of you—what I do not know. It must be the fascination some killers exert over women who are gentle and lovely. He fascinated you—I could see that. I was not going to shoot him dead at your feet and have you remember a horrible sight like that the rest of your life—and connect it with your thoughts of me."

"Then there is something fine I have discovered about you," the girl said.

"I wanted to show you," Meakin went on enthusiastically, "that I have a great respect for your feelings—and in *that* respect, at least, I can make a stronger bid for your hand than this brute gunfighter can."

The girl put up her hand. "Very well—you have made a strong bid—but before you dismiss Cal Triggers as a brute gunfighter, I have something to tell you. Cal Triggers has the brute power, yes, and he has shown that power to every one on this range. But he has something else—some-

thing which he has revealed to no one else but me. During these nights and days in the desert when Cal Triggers and I have been alone together, I have not had one glimpse of the brute that they say is in him. He has cared for me as if I had been a frail little boy—his brother—famishing for want of water. That is why he came here to fight you men—because he saw I was famishing from our desert ride. Of the many deeds that this 'brute' has done to show that he is the greatest of you men—that one deed was enough to make me believe in him."

Meakin broke out hotly in his answer: "God! Are you going crazy? Do you mean to tell me to my face that you have any feelings for this damned, hell-twisting bandit! He's bulldozed you, hypnotized you, or what the hell else I don't know! Like as not you're the kind of woman who'd kiss a man's foot because he beat you!"

Meakin realized suddenly that he was shouting at the girl in his fury. He had noticed the condition of the herd at the lower end of the cañon, and with the keen knowledge his experience had brought him of cow psychology, he knew that that herd was going to bolt. It was no time to shout, he reminded himself, when a herd, after refusing to bed, has stopped milling. He lowered his voice. "Look here, you come with me. We shouldn't be gagging about love matters here when those steers are ready to rush us and trample us any minute. You come along. I'll take you out of this damned gulch. Get onto your horse and come with me!"

Nan made no move to go. She looked up at Meakin, and when he took her by the arm she shook herself free. Then she answered him in a voice that was at once tense and cold: "I haven't told you everything," she said. "You are a greater man than Cal Triggers—if I understand what you have done. If you freed him here—for my sake—knowing that he could come back after a while and fight you—then you have shown me for the first time that you really are a man."

"Why do you say 'if'? Isn't it all clear?"

The girl pointed to the upper end of the cañon, where Cal and his captors had ridden. They were within a hundred yards of the granite gate, and as Nan pointed a small band of riders came out of the gate to meet him.

"Saul, that is the answer to my question," Nan said. "You are a coward. You sent Cal Triggers straight into the hands of a lynching party. And that's the bid you've made—that's the way you show how brave a man you are."

Meakin compressed his voice into a low, rapid flow of oaths. "How the hell should I know that the sheriff was there?" he cried. "Must you insist with your damned woman's logic that everything points to my weakness—and everything to that hell-bender's strength! I'll tell you, then, Cal Triggers is going to be hanged, and he'll not come between us again. You are mine now—and without this damned gunfighter to protect you. You're mine and I'll have you without fear!"

Meakin's hand closed about the girl's wrist and he swung her roughly into his arms. As she struggled he kissed her many times on the mouth and on the cheeks and where the disheveled red hair fell down over her temples and the side of her face—all this before she was able to beat herself clear. Then she saw his handsome face, which had flushed red. It frightened her, and she thought the tenseness of his shoulders bent toward her was the tenseness of an animal about to spring. She turned and fled into the little hut, slamming the door and throwing the cross bar into place.

The vision she had had of Saul Meakin, transformed into a beast, was a vision of the truth. Meakin, fired by the violent tussle he had had with the girl, rushed to the door, banged upon it with his fists, and failing to open it, took up a short sycamore log and beat on the pine boards, caving them partially in and splintering the two-by-four crosspiece.

The loud banging of the log against the door reverberated in the deathlike stillness between the cañon walls. The echo of it—a small, sharp, unknown sound coming back from every direction—was what started the first movement in the herd. One steer,

panic-stricken, bolted; four thousand followed in a stampede.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE DEATH-MILL.

SCRUB HAZEN for the space of at least ten minutes had considered the stampede a foregone conclusion. When he heard the distant echo of the banging on the hut up in the center of the cañon, he detected a curious, noiseless movement which went across the sea of backs like a small ripple. It was like the movement of waves just before the breaking of a typhoon—a movement caused by no apparent wind—but by some inexplicable undercurrent. And then the "typhoon" struck. The big mass of cow-brutes did not bolt forward all at once as Scrub, judging from their tense, lowered necks, had expected. Instead, the beginning of the stampede was exactly like the beginning of a great storm. The ripple of tossing heads which crossed the whole expanse, reached the further end, and then a cloud of dust arose. The mass simmered like boiling water, whirled, and then a small group of steers rolled almost like a separate wave upward into the cañon. Another wave followed and then another. There was as yet no single movement of the mass—but an undulating like breakers of a stormy ocean on a shore. The crests of the breakers were steers that buck-jumped, or else piled up on those that had stumbled before them. Scrub Hazen knew that the ultimate disaster had come. Neither he nor any of his herders could stop the panic of that mass of cow-brutes any more than a crew of sailors could abate a sea by yelling.

In order to save his life Scrub dug his heels into his pinto's flanks and tore for the sides of the cañon as fast as his horse would carry him. He reached the bluffs just as the flood of maddened steers spread out. Lashing his horse into a breakneck gallop he reached safety—the open plain and his herders.

Nan Harvess had her first intimation of the stampede when Meakin, his face now paled from the livid color of eager love to

ashen fear, broke in through the door of the hut. A low rumble of sound outside announced the first bolt, and this sound swelled gradually to a roar and then to something like a deafening, continuous crash.

Nan could not hear Meakin's frantic cry to her, but she sensed the fact that they were trapped in the path of the stampede when Meakin slammed shut what remained of the smashed door. Both rushed to the window in the rear of the shack and through it they caught sight of the girl's pinto bolting up toward the upper end of the cañon. Meakin's own pony had been hidden behind a rock a hundred yards away, and now it loped after the runaway, both riderless horses tearing madly to the upper end of the cañon and the granite gate. Meakin was about to vault out of the window and run when the first wave of the stampede reached the hut.

He turned back, his face blanched and wet, and in the next moment the little shack was surrounded on every side by the tumult. A sudden darkness came and the room filled precipitously with a choking dust. The front wall was battered by the fear-blinded steers. Horns rammed in. The door and part of the wall fell inward as a big bull crashed head foremost into it. The boards fell upon Meakin, pinning him helpless to the floor.

It seemed to Nan now as if she were in a little doll's house which was about to be engulfed in the opening chasms of an earthquake. The sounds beat into her head, the darkness engulfed her and the dust filled her throat so that she crawled numb and terrified into the pitch dark corner under a table.

But from this ridiculous little refuge she caught a glimpse through the window at the back of the shack of the upper end of the cañon. It was like a glimpse of light which promises help during the pitch blackness of a storm at sea.

Nan could discern that at the upper end of the cañon toward which the steers were racing Cal Triggers was about to be delivered into the hands of the sheriff and his posse. The posse were riding slowly down to the cañon when they saw the steers

heading up for them. It was a dangerous place to be caught up there at the narrow gate, and the posse seemed to be aware of the fact, for they wheeled their horses and fled to safety—unmindful of the prisoner who was being brought to them.

The two riders who held Cal in custody were also visible through the window. The girl watched them, and saw that apparently they had no desire to be left in the bed of the cañon, even though they were mounted. The single life of Cal Triggers meant little to them now in the face of the spectacular disaster they were about to witness. Cal Triggers, they also realized, could not escape from them without riding directly into the hands of the sheriff. If he desired to save his own life it was necessary for him to mount his horse and follow them. This his two captors left him to do, and the girl saw them lash their horses into a wild gallop for safety.

As Nan's gaze followed the fleeing men toward the upper end of the cañon she saw that, having attained a ledge of rock safe from the oncoming stampede, they had paused, turned and were now prepared to watch Cal's fight with the herd. And they would watch, Nan knew, with much the same blood-lust in which the Romans watched the ancient combats of men and beasts in an arena.

Looking down into the cañon again Nan saw Triggers vault on his horse, wheel about and look down in her direction. The girl knew that the only point with which he was concerned was her own safety.

She knew that the wrecked cabin in which she was hiding was—at least temporarily—dividing the herd. Farther up the ore-crusher, although mashed to splinters, had caused a pile-up of yearlings, whose screams were like the screams of dying human beings, as the bigger Galloways trampled upon them. At this scrambling, bawling heap the general flow of the stampede again divided. Still nearer to Cal Triggers, at a giant boulder, the mass split again—almost like the branches of a delta.

And beyond this Nan saw Triggers mounted on his horse. He had dug his heels into the flanks of his mount, and, instead of fleeing to the upper end of the

cañon in a race with the herd for safety, the girl saw him gallop down the cañon directly into the face of the maddened flood.

At first sight Nan thought Cal Triggers had resolved to ride directly into the face of sudden death. He drove his horse, she noted, toward the very center of the forward wave of the stampede, but when within ten yards of the leading steer he suddenly wheeled his horse and galloped off as if leading the rush. And now as he raced with the herd it was apparent to the girl that he was not giving his frantic horse the reins. He was holding back, and bit by bit the first huge steer—a spotted longhorn—gained on him.

As the great brute reached the flanks of the horse Cal again raced it, raking his mount from shoulder to rump. The longhorn, terrified at this horseman looming in the dust beside it, swerved, and Cal pressed his horse over swerving with him, eating off toward the right, oblivious of the big horn which ripped the underleathers of the saddle and gored the shoulders of the panic-stricken horse. Still the rider pressed his mount against the steer, and after a tearing race of a hundred yards, it began to dawn upon Nan Harvess just what Cal was doing.

The steer, partly because of its size, partly because of its color—the spotted black and white—stood out from the brown animals on all sides, and thus served as a leader. The stampede had—after the manner of most stampedes—taken a direct course, with every member of the herd following the steer before it. When Cal changed the direction of this big leader, a dozen steers followed, and then a hundred, so that in the half minute it took to shove the leader over against the side of the cañon, a big gap had opened up in the breast of the stampede. Nan Harvess saw that almost miraculously the mass had split. There were now two distinct streams to the stampede. The split made by the tiny wedge up in the vanguard had extended farther and farther backward, gaping at every weak spot—first at a big rock, then at the wrecked ore-crusher, then at the little cabin itself where Nan a moment before had been awaiting the pile-up which would mash the walls about her head.

Having started this first “warping” or side movement to the herd mass, Cal turned back again to the center of the stampede. Lashing his horse madly and pressing it forward, he worked at cross-currents with the big flow. The herd, seeing this huge form coming against it, warped still wider, and the rift opened—enough to admit the horseman as far as the first rock. This Cal took as only a temporary refuge, and in another moment Nan saw him striking out again in her direction, this time coming as near to her as the wrecked ore-crusher. The gap opened and Nan could see the form, now obscured in the dust, now distinct in a rift, galloping toward her. As he neared the hut she saw where one of his chaps had been torn completely from his leg, the leather sudadero had been ripped and the khaki of the trouser leg was blackened with blood.

Before Nan had overcome her first sickening qualm at this sight she felt herself lifted bodily to the saddle of Cal's mount. She threw her arms about the horseman, but Cal, knowing that the little pinto could not carry two riders through that maelstrom, freed himself from her embrace.

“What are you going to do?” the girl screamed. “If you don't come with me you will be killed!”

She could not hear Cal's answer because of the tumult. But she saw him take the reins of her mount, wheeling the horse about so that it faced the upper end of the cañon toward which the steers were racing.

“Come with me!” Nan cried desperately. “I am afraid! I cannot go back there alone!”

Cal answered by taking the bite of the reins and whipping the pinto furiously. He knew that that horse needed no guiding hand from then on. A cow-horse in the middle of a stampede could be relied upon to search for safety. As it felt the sting of the reins it leaped ahead, bearing the girl and leaving Cal behind, and with the wisdom of a pony bred from its breaking to “think steer,” it sped away.

The space between the two separated streams of the stampede widened, and for a moment the pinto raced with the big mass hurling along on either side of it. It passed

the ore-crusher, then the rock, and just before the vanguard of the steers began to close in at the upper end of the cañon, the maddened little horse bolted ahead into the gorge and out to the open plain and safety.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PENAeCE.

CAL TRIGGERS had seen the girl disappear into the dust cloud and he had lost sight of her long before she attained the safety beyond the gorge. The little cabin where Cal stood was now in the center of a veritable maelström. To save himself from this he leaped into the window, hoping that this wretchedly insignificant refuge would protect him as the rest of the herd passed.

Vaulting into the dark room he found himself in a pile of débris: an overturned chair, a small iron stove, a broken door and the splintered pine boards of the opposite wall, were the details that first met his eye. Underneath this mess he distinctly heard the moaning of Saul Meakin. It was a distant, weird cry which struck into his consciousness more poignantly than the banging of the steers against the wall, or the screaming of the trampled and dying yearlings.

When Cal's eyes narrowed to the shadows of the dust-filled room he saw his enemy pinned to the floor under the fallen door. The two men were thus face to face—thrown together for their reckoning and as isolated in that brief moment as if on a desert island. Their eyes met.

Meakin was crying out to him—the expression on his face resembling a beggar asking for a pittance from a rich man. That pittance was life. Cal knew then that Meakin thought his last hour had come—that if the steers did not crush him, Cal himself would kill him with his hands. And there was the same beggar's look in the man's eyes which betrayed a sneaking hate. If Meakin's arms had not been pinned, Cal knew, he would have whipped out his revolver and fired.

Triggers fell to his knees, reached for Meakin's holster and took the revolver out.

"I'm dying, Triggers!" the man cried into Cal's ears, and in such a high pitch that every word was distinct even in that thunder of noise. "Don't add another murder to your name. I'm begging you, Triggers!"

"Begging me for what?"

"I'm helpless. If I move it feels as if my back will break—I'm begging you not to finish me cold—like this. For the sake of God, give me a chance."

"A chance for what? If I let you up you won't stand on your feet and face me. You know that!"

Meakin could not hear Cal's voice above the tumult. He only knew that his rival had him now as inexorably as a man who holds a fledgling sparrow in the palm of his hand. But he could not tell by the set look on Cal's face whether he would respond to beggary, or tears, or prayers. "Give me my life, Triggers! My life!" was all that Meakin could cry.

The stern face of the man above him had grown gray. A limitless strength was there in the mouth, the set jaw, the steel-like eyes, but pain had drained it of its vivid red heat of anger. Meakin watched that face with the intentness of a man watching a hypnotist. He saw Cal turn to the opening where the front wall had been gored through. He saw him lift the revolver and hurl a blinding string of fire into the herd.

Meakin, in his terror, did not realize the effect of this, but Cal did. Steers plunged heavily forward and rolled to the ground. Behind them others piled up, and for a few moments the little cabin was untouched.

Then turning back, Cal again saw the helpless man on the floor. The weight of the débris over him was crushing him, and judging from his white face, Meakin was succumbing.

A whirl of thoughts beset Triggers as he looked down at that picture. His enemy—the enemy who had sought eagerly for his life—could be crushed there before his very eyes. The weight of one steer tumbling headlong onto that door was all that was necessary to press out his last gasp of life. And who would be to blame?

If Meakin died certainly there could be

no argument that Triggers had had a hand in it. His most ardent enemies could not say that he, Cal Triggers, had done this thing. Meakin's body would be found unmarked by bullets. There would be no man and no way to avenge his death.

And yet the gunfighter—the man who had not hesitated to kill in other fights—sensed something here which he thought would make this passive deed of standing by while Meakin died, the first real murder he had ever committed.

Meanwhile Meakin was clinging frantically to a last hope. He noted that Triggers had not taken the gun to kill his enemy. When Meakin realized that he had taken it for the purpose of saving himself from the climax of the stampede he felt a great thrill. Perhaps Cal for some miraculous reason would not take the revenge that was being thrust into his hands.

A fainting fit had come over Meakin, but he fought against it. The coming of his enemy, the firing of the six-gun, the momentary cessation of the herd's onslaught upon the shack—had helped him to fight. As he looked up at Cal now he screamed at the top of his lungs: "Help me, Triggers! If you have not come to kill me, help me! Don't stand there and look at me like that while I die!"

"Meakin, you pretended you were freeing me a short while ago—and instead you were sending me straight into the hands of a lynching party. Why should I help you? This death is coming to you! It belongs to you! It's yours! What have I to do with it?"

"Don't bring up that petty fight, for God's sake! We're both lost if you don't help! Fight for us. Help me! Help yourself! We're trapped! If you've a soul in your body, lift up this door and hold it against the steers!"

The stampede again closed in about the hut, so that it seemed to the two men as if in that maelstrom of hoofs and horns they were like flies hiding in an eggshell. But Cal Triggers was oblivious to these outward things. He looked down at his beaten enemy. Again the horror of this death—a murder—struck home to Cal. It was not like standing up face to face with a man and

drawing on him, fighting him for the sake of some woman, for the sake of honor. To stand there and watch his enemy die was as yellow as knifing him after the manner of a Mexican—in the center of his back.

"Damn you, Meakin!" he burst out suddenly. "Coward that you are, yellow coyote that you are—at least, you aren't worth blackening my soul with this crime. Now get the hell up off that floor and help me fight!"

Triggers lifted the door and the weight of the smashed-in wall by his own tremendous strength. He rammed it up against the big open side of the shack, then kicked up the table and the iron stove, which he propped against it.

Meakin, meanwhile, feeling the weight lifted from his back, crawled across the floor to the other side of the room, where he lay exhausted, trembling, watching Triggers as a wounded dog will watch his master.

Cal had not come to his decision any too soon. The last of the stampeding mass had not passed before the hut was battered on every side by the fear-maddened bulls. Cal's last ounce of energy was gone and the wound which he had received while riding into the stampede had sapped his strength. The crashing of wood and the thundering of hoofs grew suddenly quiet, but one last giant steer, with black iron haunches and a five-foot spread of horn, came buck-jumping frantically in the tail of the stampede. It smashed head-on into the wall, gorging through the door and hurling the wall, the table, the iron stove over in a mass. Before this last onslaught Cal gave way.

He sank to his knees, and as the débris crashed upon him he went on fighting with a futile determination. Words and thoughts were beating into his brain as he fought. "The life of that damned — is saved, and by me!" were some of the words: "It is a penance—for past killings—damned rot! Killed others—but couldn't kill him—the damned — — —!"

Quiet came, but the walls still whirled in a dark soundless storm. Cal sank into this velvet silence and then into oblivion. The last confused idea that trailed away was a

curious—an almost drunken assurance that he had finished a great fight.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MY DESPERADO.

WHEN Nan returned to the cañon after the stampede was over, it looked as if a cyclone had passed through it. The chaparral was trampled flat on the sand, the barrel cactus and sojuaro had been mowed down, mesquite uprooted. The ore-crusher was a mass of splinters; the hut had collapsed like a paper box, and everywhere, like soldiers strewn on a battlefield, lay the dying yearlings, and trampled steers.

As the girl raced her horse toward what remained of the hut, the sheriff and his posse clattered down from the bluffs and joined her. From the lower end of the cañon Scrub Hazen and his cow-punchers were coming. They reached the shack almost simultaneously, and Nan Harvess saw the face of her foster father, grim, stern, woebegone.

Scrub was not disposed, however, to regard the stampede as an ultimate disaster to his herd. The dead steers were almost negligible compared to the mass of the herd, and he realized that now he had a two days' ride rounding up the scattered drags.

"We got to get to work directly, now, sheriff," he said. "Once we tally up and find out who's dead, we got to get busy punching the damned brutes together agin."

"Don't appear like there's anybody dead," Pickering said.

Saul Meakin had dragged himself to his feet as the riders approached. He leaned against the pile of débris and waved the sheriff to him. "He took my gun, sheriff," Meakin cried out weakly. "What more he'll do I don't know, but I'm warning you he'll fight to the last ditch."

The girl dismounted and ran to the wrecked hut. She found Cal partly hidden in the débris. "Come here and help," she said, turning to the men.

Cal was lying on the warped floor, a hand hanging limp on the boards, his

wounded leg stretched out and pinned by the fallen wall.

Pickering took his gun away, broke it, and found it empty. Scrub and his cowmen lifted the mass of boards and dragged Cal out. The girl knelt immediately to his side.

"Sheriff, you better take care of him now that you have him," Scrub said. "I got to be goin'. My drags will be spreadin' out into Mexico if I don't hurry."

"What should I do with him now that I got him?" the sheriff asked. Every man turned to look at Pickering, sensing a new note.

"What should you do with him?" Scrub shouted. "You should give him justice for his deeds. That's what you should do."

The girl who had been tearing the khaki from Cal's wounded leg looked up sharply. "You come here, Daddy Hazen, and help me bandage this wound."

"You're crazy, gal! His wound ain't goin' to trouble him when he's swingin'!"

Sheriff Pickering came over to the girl's side. "I guess you didn't see much of the stampede down to your end of the cañon, aye, Scrub?"

"What's the stampede got to do with this hellbender?"

"He saved your gal's life—ridin' into the thick of it. Maybe that's got something to do with it—aye?"

"He saved Nan's life?" Scrub asked bewildered.

"Of course if you want to ax him to look up a tree because of his stealin' two of your rope-hosses, all right. That's the law hereabouts. But I don't reckon these here men can get their heart into the job any more."

"Daddy Hazen," the girl cried, with an excitement that amounted almost to ferocity, "you have nothing to say about those horses. They are mine. I rode with him. You can't call that horse stealing. Some one give me a flask of whisky—and give it quick!"

Pickering proffered her his flask, and she lifted Cal's head, holding the drink to his lips.

"I'll be damned to hell!" Scrub said desperately. "If he akcherly rode into that

there storm for to save Nan, I'll be damned to hell!"

"Shall we hang him?" the sheriff asked quietly.

"Hell, no!" Scrub snapped back. "Wait till I scratch my haid into thinkin', then we'll hang him."

"While Scrub's thinkin' maybe, Mr. Meakin, you'd like to make a few remarks?" the sheriff said. "I reckon you know he had somethin' to do with savin' your life. Leastwise it looked like he kept the shack standin' until the worst of the stampede swept by. What have you to say?"

"I haven't a damned thing to say."

"You ain't lookin' for to lynch him, then?"

"I am a fair man," was Meakin's characteristic rejoinder.

"Get about your business, then, Meakin, and Scrub, too!" Sheriff Pickering said. "I'll see that this here gunfighter gets justice."

"Justice?" Scrub repeated weakly. "What justice is there for a man who steals two horses and a woman! I don't want him hanged—don't give him justice. Let justice be damned this once!"

"The two hosses are offen the slate, you admit that, Scrub?"

"Yes, I'll admit that. The gal complicates it sayin' she took the hosses herself."

Pickering, watching the girl bandaging Cal's wound, went on: "Then shall we give him a necktie party for takin' the gal? They's some States which hold that crime just as serious as takin' a hoss. What's your idees on that, Scrub?"

Scrub Hazen also watched the process of the bandaging of the wound. One of his cow-punchers had lifted Cal up so that he was looking about, dazed, at the faces of the group around him. Scrub noted the smile on the gunfighter's mouth as the latter saw the girl's face over him. The cattle king, thinking of his scattered steers, came hurriedly to a judgment. "I'll tell you what I figure is justice, chief," he said. "Give the damned gunfighter to the gal. She bein' a partner of mine in a way of speakin', can have everything to say. What she says I'll say. What she agrees I

agree. And I advise the best thing she can do is to break this bird, put him on a horse, and send him packin' acrost the Rio Grande."

"I reckon the gal's judgment will be the soundest of any of us, men," the sheriff agreed. "Bein' as how she's spent a couple days and nights alone with him out in the desert, she'd orter to know him better as we know him."

The different members of the posse acclaimed this speech of their leader as a wise one. "Anything the gal says goes," they remarked, each with his own particular oath.

"All right, gal," Scrub Hazen said. "If this here gunman who horsed into your life and packed you off into the desert—I say, if he acted ungentlemanly out thar, and carried himself in any way which he hadn't orter, and which you as a lady born resent, now is the time for you to get even. Just say the word. Tell us truthful-like, 'This bird attackted me!' Just tell us that, and we'll bury him with these here daid cows."

The girl stood up and turned to her foster father. "Cal Triggers has won, Daddy Hazen," she said. "It wasn't back there in the rodeo that he won. It was out in the desert. If you don't understand me when I say that, then you may understand something else that is simpler: Cal Triggers is mine—you've told me—to do with what I please!"

Some of the men—Meakin and Scrub and the sheriff—understood this very clearly. Others did not, but it mattered little.

Scrub broke up the meeting. "Leave her take care of him, sheriff," he said. "And two of you puncher boys stay by to lend her a hand. If the hellbender did ack ungentlemanly in the desert he'll be rewarded. She'll reward him—don't you worry. I know her! And if he treated her right, she'll reward that, too—aye, sheriff? There's somethin' that works out pretty just thar—aye, what? Better 'n any of your phony juries—aye, sheriff?"

"We'll leave her do what she wants with him," the sheriff consented. "Announce that to every one—to Red Town in particular—afore we go back. Let Red Town understand that we caught our man, and

that we're dealin' out a right just hand to him. If they figure we let him go, the town, instead of lettin' me wear this sheriff's star, will be donatin' a cowhide necktie to me—and to you and the whole gang. Scrub, Meakin, Caborca and every one!"

Scrub, followed by his men, left Cal to the ministrations of Nan Harvess. When the posse was gathered, ready to mount saddle horses, the cattle king addressed the men again: "The sheriff here mentions casual-like the names of Mr. Meakin and Mr. Caborca. Now, gents, there's been a certain point goin' through my mind over and over again during this last day or two. From the moment the rodeo was over, and all through the events that has come and gone: the kidnaping of the gal out to my ranch, the meetin' we had at the Jackdog, the startin' of the herd, our ride down to the desert, and this here bunch of cows that we got to start roundin' up—all this time I been thinkin', and I've come to the conclusion that you, Mr. Meakin, and you, Mr. Caborca, are two of the orneriest, yelllowest coyotes as has ever crawled and nosed around at my feet."

"What the hell, Scrub!" Meakin began. He checked himself as he met the inexorable directness of Scrub's look, and from that moment he spoke no further word.

"The point that started me thinkin' was the smash-up in that that coach race," Scrub went on. "It didn't dawn on me till a couple days later, but I'm of the honest opinion—I'm announcing to every one here—that my foreman, Tom Caborca, pulled that race and ran into Cal Triggers's coach so's this lousy wart, Meakin, here, could win the hand of my gal."

"Look here, chief—" Caborca began.

"Mr. Caborca," Scrub interrupted. "I'm axin' you quietlike, for your resignation as foreman of my ranch. And without you want a little gun shootin', I'm advisin' you to mount your cayuse and drift. Don't quit ridin' until you get somewhere in the vicinity of Mexico City where you belong at."

Not one of the cow-herders made a move as this sentence of their chief was pronounced on their foreman. The sheriff stood by silently, and it was plain to the

others that he approved of the whole scene. Caborca finally, shrugging his shoulders, leaped onto his horse and rode into the deepening twilight.

"And now, Mr. Meakin," Scrub said quietly, "bein' as Caborca could not have framed up the race without you startin' him at it, I'm sayin' the same words to you which I said to him. Only you've got a streak in you which is ten times worse than hisn. Caborca never pretended to be a bosom lover of mine. He's only a wizened toothless little coyote. You're a coyote likewise, but you got teeth. This here stampede is due to the fact, Mr. Meakin, that you told me there was water in this creek. Bein' as you have no remarks to make—and ain't callin' me a liar, I'm axin' you—if your guts ain't got a good digestion for lead—to go the same place Caborca's went—only go farther!"

The same moment of silence ensued as these words took effect. Meakin, white-faced with the grueling his body had received in the stampede—as well as with his present shame and anger—slunk to his horse, crawled up to the saddle and rode away.

"Now, then, for the drags!" Scrub cried. The silent men hearing these words became suddenly enthused with life. They leaped to the mounts and wheeled about. Their shouts reechoed from granite walls and their lasso-ropes whizzed and sang above their heads as they sped up the cañon after the scattered herd.

Cal Triggers, comfortably helpless, had listened to the arguments of Scrub and the sheriff with a detached amusement. When the posse had gone, his head was clear enough to enjoy the scene in which he found himself. He was lying down, his shoulder, badly wrenched, was painin, and his leg throbbing. It was quite dark, and above him he could see only the silhouette of the girl as she poured out another drink for him. Two cowboys were behind her, their forms, topped with big pointed sombreros, looming in the dusk and the light of their cigarettes waving occasionally like fireflies. Beyond were the crags of the cañon side, and above them the first stars.

"Now I'm not hurt. Don't figure that,

girl. Oh, yes, a little, but in a day or two I'll be all right. Get me a horse and I'll follow you. What are those men? Guards, ay?" Cal broke out into a quiet laugh.

"Yes, you're a prisoner," the girl replied. She held up his head, laving the bruised bleeding face, and as she did this she heard him say:

"You've got me—yes. There's no doubt about that. I'm as helpless in your hands as you were in mine—out there in the heart of the desert."

The girl answered: "Yes, as helpless as I was! And now you are *my* prisoner," and then she added: "My desperado."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LOST CAUSE OF BARKEEP JO.

IT was several days before Scrub Hazen reached Mesquite with his gathered drags. In the little "one-way" cattle station news of his disaster had preceded him, and something of the romance which had been going on in the little stage stop out on the prairies called Red Town had drifted to the station. The more civilized populace of a railroad community was not disposed to believe the tales it heard. Such an event as a rodeo with a prize the hand of a pretty girl was news which should be regarded with amused wonder and certainty to some extent with disbelief.

And now Scrub Hazen—one of the principal characters of the drama—had come to town and was drowning his losses and his gains, his accomplishments and his regrets in the largest saloon dance hall in town. The population of Mesquite flocked to the bar to drink with him and to hear his version of the rodeo and its outcome. Now that his steers were at last packed away in the loading pens, Scrub drank an unstinted amount of jackass brandy. And as he drank he began to think that he had not come out as a very big loser after all. The amount of steers lost in the stampede—as he pointed out over and over again—was nothing compared to the size of his herd. In fact it was not even to be compared to the toll that the maggots took every spring from his crop of calves. It suddenly

dawned on Scrub Hazen that he had accomplished everything. His herd was the herd of a cattle king. He was rich. As he drank more, he realized that he was as rich as any man needed to be to achieve happiness. Furthermore, most of his life worries were over, for he believed there was now a chance of a man taking care of his cattle outfit so that from then on he could, as he had once expressed it, "retire for a life of rest and red-eye."

"And who is this here man you're talkin' of?" Soggy Jackson, the bartender, asked him—partly to stimulate the celebration for which he was supplying liquor.

"That I couldn't tell. Leastwise not yet," Scrub said. "It's just a humble opinion of mine. You see the bird who's goin' to manage my cattle farm had orter be connected with the partnership—like as one of the family. Whoever the gal takes for her husband will be that thar man."

"I thought the rodeo was to pick out that man?" Soggy Jackson suggested.

"It was. And I'll tell you men—all you bull-whackers and stockmen and citizens of Mesquite: it was me that thought of that rodeo. I said, 'Let's have a rodeo and the best man wins the gal!' I said. And every one else figured that was the bunk. They did that in the old days when knights in armor rode their cayuses out into a corral and punched each other with long spears the size of snubbin's posts. Sure enough, gents, I'll announce here and now, and stick by, what I says. They did it in the old days and I say they'd orter do it now. I give this here rodeo for to pick the best man for my gal. And damned if I weren't right!"

"You're always right, Scrub. After this we'll always believe you," said the genial barkeep.

"Yes, sir, you tell 'em, Soggy, after this. You tell 'em it was *my* idea! You tell 'em Scrub Hazen had a rodeo for to find the best man and the best man won!"

Above the saloon where Scrub Hazen was holding his meeting there was a rooming house—the only one in town—and it was here that Cal Triggers had been brought to have his wounds attended to by the town doctor. In the mow downstairs one person

had been listening to Hazen's orations with a peculiar bewilderment. It was a dried-up runt of a man with a low forehead, a big jaw, and one red eye. This visitor, the barkeep of the Jackdog back in Red Town, had heard the appalling news that his friend, Cal Triggers, had been caught, and that his punishment for horse stealing was left entirely in the hands of a woman!

Jo, the barkeep, whose knowledge of women was confined to a very limited sort, was aghast at this news. He had taken the mail coach for Mesquite without further ado, and, ascertaining that his unfortunate friend had been deposited, helpless, in the Gold Dust rooming house, he had entered the saloon below to ascertain just how the land lay. A few minutes later he sneaked upstairs and knocked at the door of Cal's room.

While he waited for a response his mind worked rapidly, studying the exits—the windows, staircase, and doors—of the hall in which he found himself. If Cal were alone, his escape might be effected. If he were under guard, little Jo had recourse to a six-gun. Perhaps the guard could be taken unawares and held up.

But it was Jo himself who was taken unawares. To his dismay the person who opened the door was no other than Nan Harvess herself.

Nan was at first startled at the appearance of this ugly little man, and then amused. "You can's come into see him now," she said in answer to Jo's question. "The doctor's in there."

Jo ran his one eye across the girl's face, a flushed piquant face—at the brown eyes, the red hair, and at the apron she had donned. Then he glanced sharply at the little scene behind her shoulder. If there was only the old white-haired doctor to deal with, Jo felt the situation was simple enough.

"Please, ma'am," he stammered. "I'd like for to speak to you a minute. It's about me friend in there. They tell me as how you got him prisoner, and I want for to say, ma'am, that he don't deserve too big a punishment. You don't know him, ma'am, like I do. He ain't a real gunman—that is, he's a gunman all right—but not

a road agent. By that I mean he never held up nobody and he never committed no murders. The fights he got in was all fights for to help some one who was in trouble—and when I say trouble, I mean mostly womenfolk—"

"I believe all that," the girl interrupted. "Cal Triggers doesn't need any one to excuse him."

"Yes, but afore you go condemning him, ma'am, I want for you to have the facts. Sure, I know he's done a little ungentlemanly killin', but no jury ever blamed him: one fight was in protectin' his horse from a Mex. Surely you can't blame a man for shootin' a Mex. Just bein' a Mex is enough of a crime—let alone killing' a horse!"

"No, I can't blame' him. But I must go, now."

"Just a minute, ma'am. Let me finish. Another fight was for to protect a woman from an ornery husband. And the other was to save a lady that was bein' attackted, and when I say a lady—"

"And those are the crimes that have given him the name of gunfighter?" the girl asked spiritedly.

"Exactly, ma'am, and therefore—"

"Whoever you are," the girl interrupted, "I am glad you've told me this, and I believe it. And if you want to see Cal Triggers, I'll try to help you. But remember this. I knew all these things you are telling me—these 'facts' as you call them. I knew them without their being told as facts, because—well, because I've seen Cal Triggers ride a horse, I've seen him fight, I've seen him break a stampede."

She went into the room, and while she was gone the little barkeep stood baffled, perplexed, and twirling his dusty derby at the end of a crooked forefinger. "'She knew it by seein' him fight!'" he said to himself, stupefied. "Can you beat that! Seein' him break a stampede! Now how the hell could a woman know anything about a man's past just watchin' him break a stampede. Damned if I wouldn't give a million dollars to find some woman that ain't downright crazy!'"

Nan's return interrupted his soliloquy. "The doctor is going," she said. "You can come in—but just for a few minutes."

Jo entered the room, still twirling the crushed derby. When Cal say him he burst out laughing, "What the hell!"

"Can I speak to him alone, ma'am?" the barkeep asked.

The old white-haired doctor and the girl stepped into the hall. Then dropping his voice immediately to a husky whisper, Jo said: "Now, then, Triggers, buck up. You ain't as bad orf as you think. They's no one guarding the hall. Can you walk?"

"Not yet, Jo. The doctor said I'd be all right in a day or so. What the Sam Hill are you up to?"

"Ah, you can't afford to wait a day or two!" Jo whispered. "It's got to be done now. You may never have a chanst like this agin. And as for that than gal—you can't tell what she's got in store for you. You never can tell, Triggers! Take my word for it. If they've put you in the mercy of a woman—the game's just about up, and all as you can do is to take the very first chanst you get to shag out!"

Cal did not seem disposed to regard the matter as seriously as Jo had anticipated. The little one-eyed barkeep went on excitedly: "If you don't believe what I say, Triggers, then it's good night! That's all! Look at me. I'm a fine specimen of man, ain't I, now? Just look at me!"

"I'm looking!"

"And what do you think caused me lookin' like I do?"

"Damned if I could guess, Jo."

"The judgment of a woman—that's what!" Disregarding Cal's laugh, the little man went on hurriedly: "Now, look here, Triggers. I figured it all out. There's a staircase leadin' down through the back lot where the men in the saloon downstairs won't see you. I can help you if you put your arm around me. If the gal says anything—I'm heeled good. No, I won't shoot her. I'll just make her hold up her hands, and salute us while we pass. It's a cinch. Beyond the lot is *Mush Peller's* livery stable. We can hide you there. Then at night—you vanish! Zip and you're nowhere to be found. You've escaped!"

Cal let out a sigh in which Jo detected

all the misery of a great gunfighter's defeat. The barkeep's one dry little eye almost misted with the first tear since his babyhood. Then Cal, having completed his sigh, admitted sorrowfully: "I don't want to escape, Jo."

The barkeep's reaction to this astounding confession was interrupted by Nan's entrance.

Jo watched the ensuing scene with the distraught emotions of one who is seeing the end of a tragedy. Nan arranged a pillow for the gunfighter's head, helped him sit up, pulled the blankets over his banded leg, and actually lit the cigar which Cal was holding in his mouth.

Jo, the barkeep, whose one eye had seen enough to make a much bigger man weep, threw up his hands in a gesture of disgust and sorrow and fled to the sanctuary of the bar downstairs.

"Well, you got him! You got him!" he said desperately as some of Scrub Hazen's buckaroos ordered him to drink. "You got him—and you sure did finish him!"

One of the herders shot back belligerently: "Old Scrub and Pickering did the right thing by him. They turned him over to the gal!"

"You call *that* doin' the right thing? You call that a white man's way of doin' things? The Hopis did it—turned their prisoners over to their women—well and good! But did you ever hear of white men doing it!"

"Well, the girl freed him. Now, didn't she, Jo?"

Jo burst out into a long, interminable stream of profanity and abuse. "*Free* him!" he ejaculated. "You call it *freein'* him! The worst thing that could happen to Cal has happened. The gal's goin' to *marry* him! *Free* him!" he snorted, as he elbowed his way out for the fresh air. "That's pretty good! The gal sticks him up for life, and they say she's *freein'* him! Wow!"

Scrub Hazen's cowboys, dismissing their excited townsman with jeers and laughter, returned to their cups and a furious discussion of past stampedes and future weddings

(The end.)



The Pie-Eyed Piper

By MILES OVERHOLT

THESE ought to be a device of human torture invented that one man could operate—a kind of instrument that you could wind up and then go away and get a drink, or something.

I'm looking for a man-twister like that. I want to fasten it onto a guy and render him totally unfit for publication. I am pining to break Jeff Parker up into little fragments of pain and anguish, and then oil up the bearings of the bonebreaker and light a cigarette and watch him suffer.

That's about all I want to do to Jeff.

But even then I figger it won't anyways near pay me for the mental and physical wreckage that person made of me just when the future began to look like it was all painted up in gaudy colors, and had a new engine in it and the carbon all cleaned out of its bearings.

Jeff Parker is one of the promotestest guys that ever sold stock in a sweet pea

cannery to widows and orphans, and when he came to see me just after I had acquired enough money to enable me to call a couple of head waiters by their first names and proposed a proposition, why, I didn't have presence of mind in sufficient quantities to go and hide my head in the sand.

I don't know to this day how that cash hound scented out my financial statement, unless he just naturally has a roamin' nose, because he was making his headquarters in Seattle and he trailed my wallet around and treed it in Tia Juana.

Anyway, there's where he found me and my purse, and where he unwrapped his proposition from its nice shiny covering of high class words in two and three syllables.

"All we need," he said "is a boat. I have already taken care of the cargo end of the enterprise. Every trip will net us," he said in a nice, soft, cooey language, "one hundred thousand dollars!"

"How much will this vehicle of finance set us—me—back?" I asked, adding up little sums in my sober or working mind.

"The schooner upon which I have taken an option will cost us—you—about twenty thousand pieces of silver," said Jeff.

"Your powers of imagination are plumb disturbing," I told him. "How did you happen to figger so close?"

"It's the owner's price," he answered. "I didn't figger any."

"It's my price, too," I asserted. "Twenty thousand dollars in money is the fullest extent of my purse-proud snobbishness. After that is gone there ain't anything between me and sparring with the old time clock."

"This here cargo," went on Jeff, "is obtained in large and commodious quantities on a certain island I have in mind, and there is a crew of men and women working down there for us for nothing per diem."

"You sure know how to make the ordinary methods of batting out a livelihood look powerful romantic," I remarked. "What ails them working people that they want to devote their energies to making us happy? Are they paying a bet, or what?"

"This here island is plumb overrun with Asiatic rats," answered Jeff Parker, rodently. "Our cargo will consist of them rats. These here natives are working for us by killing the rats because they eat the crops and fruit and otherwise disturb the even tenor-leven of their ways."

"I ain't no pie-eyed piper," I told Jeff. "Who are you going to trap them rats with and why?"

"Three or four cities on the Pacific or Western coast of America have standing offers of five cents a head bounty on Asiatic rats," answered Jeff Parker. "Our business is going to be to supply them with said rats."

Gosh! It was the reasonablest line of reasoning I ever heard. Here was the market and there was the rats. It was only a matter of bringing the two together.

"We will deliver a cargo of, say, two million rats per trip," warbled Jeff. And it was certainly sweet music the way he told it. "These here cities are waging a cam-

paign against the rat," he went on, "and they are making it an object for folks to bring 'em in. There ain't nobody barred. You bring in the rat and they pay you the nickel—no identification, no red tape or anything."

"Me, I don't know much about port regulations, or docking privileges, or any other maritime rule," I said, "but ain't there something in the by-laws and constitution that says somebody has to inspect a cargo at a given point, or at quarantine, or somewhere?"

"Sure," answered Jeff. "But what of it? We will put all these here rats in barrels—under a layer of coconuts. The inspectors bust open the barrels, find the coconuts and give us the O. K. Anyway, there are nine different ways of beating 'em. We can bring the rats into port in a gasoline launch if we want to. Let's worry about landing when we get ready to land."

Well, after all, it sounded reasonable to me. It certainly was a simple ratty proposition, and if you stop to figger that five cents times two million rats is one hundred thousand dollars cash money, why, I'd like to see the guy that could resist the persuasive ways of Jeff Parker when he put it in plain moneyed words.

"How many trips there and back were you about to allege we could make per year?" I asked, thinking on all four cylinders and adjusting the rapid-calculating side of the old bean so it would register into high figgers.

"Four, at least," he replied. "Mebbe five."

"In round or symmetrical numbers," I observed "five of them trips would bring us in a total of five hundred thousand or half a million dollars per annum."

"Exactly," said Jeff. "Half of which finances of the realm would be yours to have and to hold, or otherwise dispose of in such places made and provided."

"Yeh," I said, "but I'm expending all the expensive cash, then what?"

"And I'm furnishing the rats free," returned Jeff. "And I'm the gent that's employing the brains. Also I got the idea."

But when he said we wouldn't take out any profits of money from the venture till

I got my twenty thousand back in a quantity, why, that is where I took on signs of wealth, and we went into rapid partnership.

"It's a kind of a funny thing," ruminated Jeff, after we had fixed up the finances, making Jeff a partner of mine—"it's a funny thing, but on the island of San Miguel about a hundred miles north of this one we are bound for—on this here San Miguel there are just as many cats as there are rats on the other island."

"How come?" I asked him.

"Oh, somebody took a few of 'em there a couple of hundred years ago and they been populating ever since. Nobody lives there now—too cyclonish."

"Well I hope we hit the right island," I rejoined. "Cats are too scratchy."

"We won't miss the rat island," said Jeff. "That'll be my job."

So we went to Seattle, and by using a lot of argument that didn't savor in any manner of a marine or oceanic flavor, but which was composed mostly of the clinking of dollar against dollar in a soft, seductive jingle, we got the owner of the old sea wagon, the Bessie Hicks, to come down to eighteen thousand six hundred and seventy-two dollars and twenty-five cents, leaving us just about enough financial reverses to buy supplies for one round or circular trip.

Then we nearly went into a nervous decline trying to find hardly-able seamen to avast the halyards, or whatever it was we wanted 'em for, and we had to take on nine different foreign elements to make up any kind of a crew, which was discouraging right at the start. No, sir; nobody wanted to take a chance on the Bessie Hicks but Jeff and me.

Those goulashers couldn't understand more than eight-tenths of what we were trying to educate 'em up with from time to time, because Jeff and me hadn't ever been nautical to speak of in all our lives.

So when we would allege that we wanted to start going in a southerly direction, why, we had to go and get a Malay to change our language into Hindu and then the Hindu would break the words into little pieces and slather it onto a chink, and the Chineser would relay it onto a Swede, and by the

time it got around among the boys it would sound like a lot of gossip.

It looked like we were talking about that mess of human hash behind its back, which we weren't. We couldn't think of fitting words to do it with.

But we got headed in a direction after the subject had been thoroughly debated in every tongue the world affords—except mebbe Cold and Ox—and then Jeff, he took me into his confidence sufficiently to inform me that we were about to pay the first visit of our regular trips to Rat Catcher's Delight, or the island of San Isobel.

This here outlandish place is located in a longitude and latitude somewhere or other, which Jeff showed me on a map made by a mapmaker on a Monday morning before he had gone and taken a Turkish bath and a few shots of bromo. That mappish person certainly must have been feeling tough when he spilled the ink promiscuously about that sheet of innocent white paper. So I couldn't make any sense out of his hangover.

But I didn't figger on getting up in the night and sneaking back there or anything, so I didn't care if I never did know whether it was north or south of a latitude, or in old Joe Latitude's backyard.

"It's a little island about eight miles across and two hundred and fifty miles off the coast of Mexico," Jeff explained. "It is populated with a mess of people composed mostly of Cholos. It is a good-natured island, and it would raise most any kind of a crop if it wasn't so busy raising rats. A boat with a game leg or something put in there one day to get doctored, and it casually emptied a herd of these here Asiatical rats thereabouts. They being good at mathematics—multiplying and the like—why, the island is now in the general condition of what you could properly call overrun."

"Now, this here island of cats—San Miguel," I suggested, "why wouldn't it be a fine idea to bring the two factions together—cats and rats?"

"Don't be silly," admonished Jeff. "Nobody cares about them Cholos—and they can't go and import cats—no money, no boats, no sense."

Which ended that argument almost before it was born.

"If there was some way of telling it to the foreign-born population of this here traveling rat-hound which we had just purchased, I would be in favor of renaming it the Hamelin," I said. "It don't act to me like no Bessie Hicks."

"We can't be too public about our mirthful little excursion," warned Jeff. "It might be that some of these here towns that are about to replenish our depleted purses won't like our idea of pursefuge if they find out we are going to all this trouble and out of our way like this to bring 'em rats."

And that ended my conversational activities into the conduct of the cruise. I was the silent or spectatorial partner, it looked like.

Jeff Parker went ahead and invented a lot of cuss words composed of all nine languages which he used to steer the crew with, and I wish I had learned 'em so I could say 'em right off. I could use them very advantageously right this minute. They were the finest working words I ever heard, and whenever we would say six or eight feet of them without changing gears, why, those boat hounds would move about so fast you couldn't tell which was getting four dollars a day and who wasn't.

So, by carefully choosing his verbal literature that way, we got down to that trick island in darn near record time, if anybody had ever kept a record, which he hadn't.

It looked like mebbe we didn't get much of a bargain in our ship, because the captain, who was a citizen of the United States, but who wasn't working at it much, kept finding little typographical errors here and there, and when we landed in the so-called harbor of San Isobel we had to go to work and mend the vessel all up where it had frayed out and worn holes in its heel, or keel, or whatever it was, and we were delayed a lot more than we had figured.

We kept putting on patches and darning up the rents and things in Bessie for about a month, and our food supply started right in to run low. That's the trouble with food—first it runs high, then it runs low.

So we hurried the little detail of getting them rats killed and placed in cold storage, aided and abetted by the Cholos of the island who were just as anxious as we were to say good-by, or *adios*, as the case may be.

The only trouble was, we didn't have no coconuts to cover the rats with, because it was the wrong season of the year, or something. Also we didn't have any money to pay for 'em. Still we didn't care much. Just before we left Seattle we made arrangements with a seafaring gent to take off our cargo in the middle of the night, a couple of thousand at a time, and land 'em where there wasn't anybody looking. No, we didn't care about the coconuts, anyhow.

My, but those natives were rough on rats! I started right in to worry whether the supply was going to last us six million dollars' worth or not, but when I found that those Islandians had to sleep up in trees that had to be daubed up with something that rats don't make a practice of eating—though I can't imagine what it could be—why, I began to feel better about it. Those Cholos could certainly tell the biggest rat tale I ever heard.

When we drew up the big iron fish-hook—that heavy thing you throw overboard when you want to pause, or even come to a full stop—more in sorrow than in anchor, and I went over by the taffeta rail, or whatever you call it, and sang "Aloha," why, Jefferson Parker and I went almost delirious, we were that pleased with ourselves.

A hundred thousand dollars' worth of rats! Gosh! We felt fine.

Yes, sir, there we were with our fine large cargo and headed homeward, and everything was great, except the matter of grub, which was as scarce aboard as the English language. But we didn't say anything about it in any foreign dialect of words. There wasn't any use; we couldn't get any more, anyway—not without money.

The first day out was all right, and Jeff didn't have to cuss the crew with more than eight or nine hundred feet of words. But that night one of those storms which had been brewing over in the storm brewery was emptied out and over and about us, and Jeff couldn't yell loud enough to make any headway whatsoever.

Most of those un-native sons went and hid behind things and we got headed backwards and when the sun dispelled the mists, we found ourselves paddling merrily along about seven latitudes out of longitude; also the jib-boom was suffering from a broken Mizzenmast, and the spinnaker was jammed through the holocaust; the quarter-deck was busted into small change, and nothing at all was shipshape.

So by the time we got our bearings and oiled 'em up, and the wind propellers began to propel us along in the right direction again, we were two days from where we ought to have been at.

Then we began putting the foreign-aft skippers on a diet which had been ordered by old Dr. Jeff Parker, and they went and objected in all the different styles of language at their disposal.

Jeff, he did his best in explaining that so many foreign people were starving to death and there was a great wave of unemployment aboard in the land and one thing and another, and that the President wanted all us loyal citizens to kind of conserve on food as much as possible. And the spokesman for the hardly-able seamen alleged that far be it from them to deprive any starving people of food, but they themselves were among those so prominently mentioned by the President, and when did they eat?

It was a moot question, and if Jeff and I hadn't been the only gents aboard with a couple of guns apiece, there is no telling what we would have had for supper.

Somehow we managed to keep the old vehicle traveling for a couple of days longer, and while the crew were quiet, they kept acting so silent that I began to get scared of 'em.

Then one night I went down into the hold to see if it was holding, and there was our Chinaman diligently devouring—well, this here chink wasn't going to starve to death, you could see that.

It was a pretty ratty trick and it scared me worse than ever. What if the whole crew took the same notion? I said that to myself under my breath and hurried back up and told Jeff. So Jeff sent me back down below to guard the cargo, and he

took it upon himself to keep the ship busy plowing the raging main.

It wasn't more than another day till that raging main began to act as though it had been plowed too much. It seemed to take on a sort of a bilious attack, and then when another storm reached out from somewhere and slapped Bessie Hicks where it didn't do her any good, why, I came up on deck and talked things over with Jeff.

The captain started in to yell a mess of words that didn't bring about any calmness anywhere, and Jeff he started in with his double-action cuss words, and after a while we got the crew to tacking in the halyards and unbuttoning the main sheets, and one thing and another, and prepared for the worst. The only trouble was that the worst was a whole lot worse than we expected.

This here captain alleged that the Bessie Hicks wasn't in any kind of a physical condition to withstand much of a shock, and as for him, he'd rather take his chances in a row boat if the storm got much meaner dispositioned. Which same it got.

Yes, sir, that storm became so violent that I went down and joined the rats and would have gladly died for my country. Only there wasn't any country around, which was the whole trouble.

The Bessie Hicks turned around again and started back, and the captain said it was just like a woman ship, and, taken altogether, it wasn't any balmy afternoon's sail, no matter how you looked at it.

Little pieces of ship kept falling down from the top of something—the crow's nest, mebbe—and spars, sails and masts mingled all in one wild mess there on the deck, while the crew crawled under things and yowled, and pandemonium busted out of the fo'castle and reigned.

"She won't stand it much longer," our brave captain shouted as he staggered down the stairs to get him a drink.

"Then what?" I yipped back.

"The life boats!" he yelled, wiping his chin.

Gosh! What about our cargo!

That was the large thought that stuck up in my mind like a sharp stick, pushing all other thoughts plumb out into the storm.

Jeff, he came tearing down to where I was at and shouted that if we wanted to get off alive, we would have to lower the boats.

"The operator is sending out a call for help," he yelled at me, "but the chances are help won't come in time!"

Yes, ma'am, Jeff was scared. Because he didn't linger only long enough to cast a sad look at our nice fresh rats, and then he dashed back up on deck again.

If everybody else was going to get out and row I couldn't see any good reason why I should stay and watch the rats any longer. Rats, I always read, left a doomed ship, but ours wasn't leaving any to speak of. It began to look more like the doomed ship would leave the rats! But I didn't have time to speculate much on that reversed angle of the rat question. It seemed like it was time for me to go bye-bye.

But I didn't go. Succor came floundering along toward us about the time I fell on the upper deck in the general outlines of another schooner that wasn't afflicted with general debility like Bessie Hicks.

It was the West Gazoot, and she hove to, as the saying goes, and threw us a line. It was as good a line as the West Gazoot ever pulled, too, I'll say that. Then she edged in closer and closer till she was floundering alongside of the Bessie Hicks. Next a mess of sailors, who didn't seem to mind getting wet in the least, tied us together—lashed the Bessie Hicks solidly to the West Gazoot—and started along through that there storm hand in hand like they had known each other all their lives.

The weather certainly fooled us, though. Because I'll bet it wasn't more than half an hour after we were all serenely tied up to the West Gazoot till the darn storm stopped churning the ocean and tearing little particles of Bessie into shreds, and the sun came out, and everything began to be jake again.

"Lookit!" I said to Jeff. "What did you go and call in some outside help for? We didn't need no assistance in this kind of weather."

But Jeff, he turned sadly away and went and lay down somewhere. Jeff Parker was almost as much of a wreck as Bessie Hicks.

I sought me a couch, too, where the weather hadn't unmade the beds, and slept till Morpheus got tired of me, and then I got up, which was along about the day afterward.

When I came on deck again the sun was shining brightly, the waves were rippling merrily, and if there had been any birds around there they would have been singing.

Most of our crew was on the West Gazoot helping out the hired men over there and getting themselves something to eat between intervals, and Jeff and the captain were taking a drink.

So I went up and joined the party, making three of us who were thirsty, and Jeff said he wanted to talk serious to me, which he did.

"The captain of the West Gazoot will want salvage," began Jeff.

"Well, let him have it," I said. "I ain't got a bit, myself, but mebbe we can find some around the Bessie Hicks. What," I asked, "is salvage, and what do they use it for?"

"They use it for lining the pocketbook," answered Jeff.

"Oh, well, he doesn't want much then," I comes back. "I reckon we can let him have enough to line his wallet."

"Salvage," explained Jeff, "is dough, dinero, kale, jack. It's the stuff any boat claims when it rescues another one calling for help. They mostly name their own price."

"Oh," I said. "So that's it. How much does this here Gazoot want for rescuing Bessie?"

"He seemed to think about thirty thousand dollars would square it," answered Jeff.

"Thirty thousand dollars!" I yipped. "Why, we only paid—say, is this here one of Captain Kidd's boats?"

"It's tough luck," wailed Jeff. "But I don't know what we can do."

"I know what we can do—fight him," I said. "I ain't going to give that captain more than the boat is worth for saving the darned thing."

"You gotta remember he saved our lives—and saved the cargo," asserted Jeff. "He figgers those items in, too, you know."

"Just the same, I'm going to put up a fight," I insisted. "Nobody is going to take the only boat we got right out of our mouths."

"But don't you see, we can't fight him!" Jeff Parker reminded me. "We are in a kind of an illegal business, you know."

"Gosh! I never thought of that. We can't go into court or the whole story'll come out," I wailed. "Now what?"

"We still have the cargo," murmured Jeff sadly. "I think myself that the captain of the West Gazoot is a smuggler, or something. He acts mysterious about his cargo, too. But that won't help us none. He can throw it overboard and still make money—on us."

Yes, sir, it looked like we were going to lose poor old Bessie right when we were getting used to her.

"But we can't pay him any money," I said. "Let him take Bessie and call it square—huh?"

"I don't see what else we can do," mourned poor old Jeff. "I'll see if he will accept such a proposition."

Then he walked across our decks and onto the West Gazoot, which was tight against Bessie, and I went away somewhere so I could feel sorry for myself alone.

All the hatchways and the trap doors and the cellar doors and everything had been opened during the storm, and there wasn't anybody left on our boat to do any heavy work like closing 'em, so we left everything open.

That is why I went over on the West Gazoot to see if I couldn't persuade somebody to come over to our house and close things. I didn't know but it would injure our cargo, leaving it exposed that way.

But I couldn't find anybody who would take any orders or even advice from me, so I went back aboard the Bessie and talked to our captain.

"This here salvage question," I said to him. "What is it? Do we lose the ship just because we yelled for assistance?"

"That is the law of the sea," replied the captain, blowing some very distasteful tobacco smoke in my face. "The rescuer is allowed a certain sum, depending upon the value of the vessel and its cargo."

"And I suppose this here West Gazoot will drag us into port somewhere," I said.

"Yes—Seattle," answered the cap. "The West Gazoot is bound for that port."

"Could we travel alone?" I asked him, wondering if mebbe I couldn't cut the ropes and sneak away from the Gazoot.

"No; your rigging is torn to shreds," replied this here crape-hanging captain.

"I wonder what sort of a cargo the West Gazoot is carrying around with her?" I asked our hired man, and he said he didn't know. He alleged that it wasn't polite to inquire. Certain captains object to such pointed questions, he explained.

Which kind of gave me an idea. If this here West Gazoot was a bootlegging ship, mebbe we could bluff 'em and get our boat away. So I went away and did me a lot of figgering.

Jeff came back after a while and we talked that phase of the matter over pro and con.

"The captain of the Bessie Hicks says it ain't polite to ask 'em what kind of a cargo they carry," I said. "But as you are a sort of a lowbrow, uncouth and uncultured, why don't you go ahead and ask the captain, anyway?" I suggested to Jeff.

"I did ask him," Jeff came back at me. "I asked him and he said he wasn't asking me about our cargo. Them were his well-chosen words, so what could I do?"

"I don't know," I said. "Only I'm gonna find out. I believe we can flimflam this guy out of the Bessie Hicks. I gotta hunch that all is not well with the West Gazoot's interior department."

"If he's smuggling, the chances are we can bluff him," remarked Jeff. "But—there's our own cargo to be considered. Did you ever stop to think as you ponder upon things that we ain't got much room to bluff in?"

There it was again! Every time I got a bright thought Jeff Parker would come along and step on it.

"Well, anyway, we got a hundred thousand dollars' worth of rats," I sighed. "That ain't so bad, after all. Even if we lose Bessie, we will still have a young fortune."

Sure; I asked the captain of the West

Gazoot would he take the boat, minus the cargo, and call it square and he said he would," Jeff said.

So we consoled ourselves with that. It wasn't so bad when you'd stop to think of it. And I went to bed that night with a fair disposition.

We were within two days of Seattle by this time, and Jeff and I were getting back into good humor once more. Really, it wasn't going to be so bad. The chances are that after all our debts were paid and the rats disposed of, we would still have mebbe twenty-five thousand dollars apiece to the good—and I would have my twenty thousand dollars back. Not so bad—not so bad.

It was a fine serene morning when I woke up and the sea was as calm as a Friday night. I shaved and dressed and hummed a merry lay and got ready for a fine breakfast.

Jeff wasn't anywhere in sight when I tripped gayly out on deck, but it was kind of late and I figured he was at the eats.

It seemed good to be alive, after all, and in a couple of weeks I would have a lot of good money. Then me for Tia Juana and the races and the care-free life. I breathed in a lot of fine ocean air and hummed a little ditty.

"Ah, the rats," I trilled. "I shall go down and take a look at our own wealth and then for a little promenade on the deck, and breakfast."

So I went down into the hold and turned on the lights. I looked—and looked—and then put on my glasses and looked again. I was looking for rats, gentlemen, but I looked in vain.

Yes, sir, what had once been a million rats all piled up in nice even rows was nothing at all. Every rat was gone!

Frantically I rushed about seeking our cargo, but there was not a sign of a rat. They had vanished in the night as completely as if they had been but a dream!

It was the strangest thing I ever heard of. It was inexplicable! It was awful!

I hurried up on deck and sought Jeff. At last I found him sitting dejectedly upon a roll of rope, his head in his hands.

"Where's our rats?" I shrieked.

"They're gone—a million rats have disappeared from this ship! Where did they go? How?"

"I don't know," Jeff answered, gloomily. "I just came from there. It's a mystery and—and—I'm afraid. It's black magic!"

"It's black something," I yipped. "I'm gonna find out!"

So I beat it across to the West Gazoot. The sailors were loafing and laughing and enjoying themselves while our crew did their work for 'em, but they didn't pay any attention to me when I spoke to 'em.

Finally, though, I found their captain.

"Our cargo!" I said to him. "Our cargo—it disappeared!"

"No! When?" he wanted to know.

"Last night," I told him. "It—they—were all there last evening—and now they—it's gone—all of 'em!"

"That's strange," he said, puzzled. "Of course I don't know what your cargo consisted of—but I can't understand it."

"Didn't—don't you know what we had in the hold of the *Bessie Hicks*?" I asked him, and he shook his head.

"No, in some cases it isn't the proper thing to ask," he observed, kind of smiling, "and I said nothing to your captain or crew about it."

Then he turned to look after something, and I went away puzzled more than ever.

Down at the other end of the ship was a sailor who looked like he might have some sense, so I went over to him and asked him if he ever heard of a cargo disappearing, and he said not unless it leaked out.

I told him ours wouldn't—we weren't smuggling liquor, I said.

"We got kind of a funny cargo," he told me after a bit. "But at that I'll bet the owners make some jack. We raided an island down the coast a ways—took us a month to get a load—but they're the finest specimens I ever saw," he said. "Come along; I'll show you."

Then as we started down below he added:

"I'll bet they sell 'em as fast as they show 'em. They're almost as fine as Persians."

He turned on the lights and there was the wildest commotion you ever heard of, quiet, though, but active. As soon as my eyes

got accustomed to the half light I saw. Yes, sir, I saw a million nice, fat contented cats! They looked as though they had just enjoyed a fine meal—of rats.

"Do you leave the doors to this here cellar open nights?" I asked the kind sailorman. And he said they did. They couldn't get away, he said, and it gave the cats a chance to run around the decks and mebbe catch a few rats, in case there were any aboard.

Yes, ma'am, unless Jeff Parker has gone back to that rat island and is living in a tree, I'll get him. And when I do I am going to invent one of them one-man, self-starting torturing devices and apply it to Jeff in a most fatal manner.

Why, doggone it, if I should hear somebody yell "Rats!" right now, the chances are I would jump up and bite myself on the neck. That's how much of a ratter Jeff Parker has made of me!



'Twixt the Devil, and the Deep Sea

By JACK BECHDOLT

IN one respect Captain Fog Horn Hood, master of the obscure and homely stern-wheel steamboat Puget Queen, begun to show his age.

His blue eyes, if somewhat faded, still could peer farther into thick weather than any pair of eyes on Puget Sound. His prominent and slightly bulbous nose could smell a reef or shoal or landfall quicker

than any nose afloat. His voice carried farther and expressed a repartee guaranteed hot enough to blister the plates off any steel ship built. His wild shock of hair and scrubby mustache, which looked like a hard used shoebrush, had been white so many years they indicated nothing, just as his face always had been red. But when Captain Fog Horn Hood wanted to read writ-

ing or print he was now obliged to resort to spectacles. At this moment he was wearing the "specs" and reading a letter from his wife.

The steel-framed lenses gave a curiously mild, scholarly distinction to an otherwise disreputable exterior. The Queen's commander invariably wore a mangy old uniform cap which bore the faded gilt title, "Captain." It was thrust far back on his wild shock of hair. As invariably he wore a red flannel shirt, and the suspenders intrusted with the care of his trousers usually dangled freely about his hips, causing alarm among strangers lest the trousers slip their moorings. To a certain extent the spectables ameliorated this dishevelment as he sat in the Queen's boxlike pilothouse, sucking at a grimed corncob pipe, tipping up his head and peering benevolently at Mary Hood's letter.

One or two days of the week Fog Horn spent with his wife at home on their ranch on Chuckanut Bay. The other days he piloted the hump-backed, dreary gray coated little freighter on her many errands for the Halsey Navigation and Freighting Company. Every day of his absence his wife mailed her husband a letter. Years ago this curious pair of turtle doves had exhausted topics for correspondence. There was no longer need of much speech between them, so well did they understand each other. In lieu of writing, Fog Horn's wife daily sent him a batch of news items clipped from the various papers, items of any sort she thought might interest her lord and master. Fog Horn always found time to read them as eagerly as a girl of sixteen reading her first love letter.

Mr. Olson, the Queen's first officer, came into the pilot house. "We ban all cleaned up on freight," he announced. "Ay stowed dose milk crates for Fir Point forward. She ban all ready, sir."

Fog Horn nodded absently. "All right, Olson. We clear in a few minutes. Stand by."

Olson nodded, then added slowly, "Young faller on dock he asks me would we take two passengers to Bellingham tonight."

"Hell, no! This ain't no passenger

boat. Ain't been for twenty years, you know that—"

"Ay tall him so."

"Not but she ain't as fitten to be a passenger boat as the Councilor," Fog Horn added hurriedly, ever jealous of the big, rival steamer that had taken away what little passenger business the Queen had left. "But we don't take no passengers. Can't mess up with 'em on a freighter."

"Yah. Ay tall him that, too. Young faller says he would pay double fare—"

"He can save his money and ride on Bown's boat."

"Yah. Ay tall him that, too. Maybe he don't like das Councilor. He wants he shall go on Queen—"

"Then he can take a train. Hell's bells, we ain't runnin' no excursions if it was the President of the United States asked us to. What's he want to ride on a flea bitten old scow like this for? Did you throw him off the dock like you should?"

"He ban nice young faller," Olson said deprecatingly, "but Ay gass he understand all right."

"Well, he'd better! Sounds fishy to me, tryin' to ride on the Queen at midnight and all like this. Maybe he's tryin' to slip away from the police. First time I heard the old Queen was so popular with the travelin' public." Fog Horn voiced his jealousy for the little freighter's dashing rival in his grumbling. Publicly, nothing could make him admit the Queen was no longer the equal of anything afloat. Privately he had to acknowledge the bitter truth. He changed the subject abruptly. "Olson, Richmond P. Bown's girl's going to get married!"

"Yeah?"

"So it says here in this piece from a paper Mary sent me. A piece from—uh—" he peered more intently; "a piece from the Seattle *Planet*. Listen:

"The wedding of Miss Callie Bown, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Richmond P. Bown, to Mr. Wallace Vanderhoeven Schuyler, of New York, at high noon Friday the thirteenth, is the all absorbing topic among social circles this week. The nuptials of the daughter of the prominent shipping magnate and the son of a nationally known Eastern family will be solemnized by the Rev. Dr. Aloysius J.

Walnut. Miss Bown numbers countless friends among the city's younger set, and Mr. Schuyler, as the son of Morgan J. Schuyler, of New York City, has found all doors open to him during his brief stay in this city.

"It says a lot more hogwash in here, too, Olson; stuff that no regular man would give a hoot in hell for. I guess Bown wrote that piece himself and got the editor to print it. Listen to this: 'the union of two such prominent families as the Morgan J. Schuylers, New York City's famous financiers, and the Richmond P. Bowns, founders of the Tilikum Lines, controlling the transportation of Puget Sound—son of the social leaders of America mating with one of our foremost families of the West,' and so forth and so on! If Bown didn't write that he hired somebody to say it for him. Blowin' about his bigness, gloatin' about the young millionaire he's got into his damn family! That's Bown for you!"

Olson agreed. "Yah! Sounds like Bown!"

Fog Horn turned sentimental. "Olson, my Heavens, think of Callie Beck's girl old enough to get married. You and me ain't so young any more."

Olson considered, scratching his tow head. Finally he achieved a witticism. "Vell, Ay gass you and me don't get no invite, huh, captain?"

"When a salmon can sing we do!" Fog Horn agreed, returning Olson's slow grin.

Richmond P. Bown being the head and chief owner of the sound steamboat trust, and for years the bitter enemy of Fog Horn Hood, Olson, Dan Halsey, the Queen's owner, and all that pertained to that pestiferous little freighter that persisted in doing business despite all his efforts to drive her to the boneyard, the joke was duly appreciated.

"Callie Beck was a nice girl when you and Mary and me and her was to school together up at Chuckanut," Fog Horn reminded his mate.

"Yah, but she married Bown—"

"A gentle kind of girl. A good woman, Olson—"

"She married Bown!"

"When she was past thirty. After Art Rogers died. When her father's business

was busting and somebody had to save him, Olson!"

"Ay wouldn't marry Bown to save nobody—"

"I seen that girl of Bown's a couple times, Olson. Like Callie, she is, gentle, fine. Mary knows about her, too. A good girl for all Bown tries to spoil her with society trainin'—"

"A fine father she's got!"

"Yeah, a fine father! This here Wallace What's-his-name Schuyler, I heard about him, too. He's no good. Got a rich old man and too much money to spend. But that's like Bown, to throw his daughter away on some young whiffet that's got a fine name and goes in society. Prominent families, hell! Don't I remember Bown when he was pushin' a truck? And a damn poor longshoreman he made. And now, because he's robbed the Halseys of the trade they built up, and owns some steamboats, he claims to be a prominent family. Thinkin' of him makes me sick! Olson, we got work to do. Roust out the hands and slip your lines. We're going, now."

Fog Horn folded his newspaper clippings away and went to the pilot house window to peer and sniff professionally at the chill, damp air of a murky midnight. Fog obscured Seattle harbor, and the few craft moving were making night noisy with their sirens.

"Thickenin'," Fog Horn observed thoughtfully. "Goin' to be thicker'n a wool undershirt in an hour—"

The pilot house door opened again on Olson, and behind him, dimly seen, two other figures.

Olson said apologetically, "Captain Hood, das here young fellers wants you should take them up to Bellingham."

"No!" Fog Horn roared, and the voice that had won him his nickname carried across the dock, down the length of the long warehouse, and lost in a fog-filled street, echoing disjointed syllables in the dark.

"May I have a word with you, Captain Hood?" began another voice, a young man's.

"No! This ain't no passenger boat. You been told that once. Now you get to

blistering blazes off'n my boat, you good for nothing, ivory skulled Siwash! You got a hell of a nerve—"

"Captain," said the stranger warningly, "there's a lady here with me!"

Fog Horn stopped with a grunt, as if he had been hit amidships. "'Tain't no use," he added more mildly. "You and the lady get off my boat. Olson, see they get off, you hear me?"

From near by in the fog came Olson's placid "Yah," and the intruders moved away.

"Ease your spring line. Cast off. Ease your bow and stern lines. Cast off your bow line. Cast off your stern line." Fog Horn started the fog quivering with orders.

The Queen's jingle bell summoned the engine room to stand by. The gong clanked. A mighty quiver shook the aged hull and the huge, overgrown stern paddle began to churn water. Fog Horn's practiced hand found the whistle pull and held it down while a prolonged bellow racketed across the water and warned all that floated of the coming of a boat with more lives than the fabled cat, and a commander who never acknowledged defeat.

"Passenger boat!" Fog Horn growled to himself as he spun the big wheel, his head thrust out of the open window and the fog glistening in diamond drops in his white hair. "Passenger boat! That's a business for Bown and his like. I'd like to see the passenger can get on my boat."

And at this moment the door opened to admit Olson, who brought with him two uninvited passengers to answer Fog Horn's wish.

II.

OLSON's apologetic cough notified Fog Horn of the unexpected realization of his expressed desire to see the passenger who dared ride on the Puget Queen. The old man turned from the wheel, and his jaw dropped. For a moment all he could do was stare.

His visitors were the same pair recently ordered off the boat, a well built young fellow in yellow rain coat and soft hat who stood his ground with a desperate sort of eagerness, his face a little belligerent, and

a young woman, wrapped against the chill and heavily veiled.

"Ay find dem hiding on das freight deck," explained Olson briefly. "Yust after Ay t'row deme off Ay gass dey come back on board."

"We had to do it!" the young man declared. "Case of life or death, that's how it was. I'm sorry—sorry to put you out, I mean, but simply this young lady and I have got to get up to Bellingham, and on your boat. We'll pay whatever you ask."

Fog Horn Hood heard this in grim silence. He did not grant the young man a reply, but his heavy hand spun the wheel hard over, and to Olson he said curtly, "Stand by to slip a bow line to the dock."

"Look here!" cried the unwelcome passenger, "you're not going to take us back?" He added vehemently, "No! You can't take us back!"

The Queen's skipper emitted a noise halfway between a sardonic chuckle and a bark.

"Is that so?" he asked with elaborate sarcasm. "Is that possible? I can't throw you off my own boat, hey? I ain't no longer master of it, I suppose! I take orders from every la-de-da young squirt that wants to climb aboard, do I? Why, you young cockroach—"

"Listen, captain! This young lady—for the sake of a lady won't you please—"

"Yes, Captain Hood, won't you please!"

The girl joined the plea, the first words she had spoken. Her voice was low and extraordinarily musical.

Fog Horn turned his irate glare on her.

"Young lady," he said warningly, "I don't know you. I ain't askin' anything about you. But judgin' by your looks you'd ought to be home in bed, not runnin' around steamboats with young fellows this time of night. And furthermore, miss, as captain of this boat I refuse to take any hand in your escapades. When I say a thing that thing happens, and I say you both are going to get off my boat—"

And then, once more, the unexpected happened. The pilot house door opened on a third stranger.

Three stowaways in a night!

It was too much for Fog Horn. Instinct

prompted him to stop the engines and let the Queen drift while he faced the intruder, his chest heaving, his fists twitching by his sides, his fertile brain inventing a brand new vocabulary to express what he thought of them all.

But it was the stranger who had the first word. He was a large, stout, pompous man, and he puffed from his hurry and his importance. Under his light top coat full evening dress showed. His soft hat was jammed tightly on his head much as if he had recently been running hard and was afraid of losing it.

"Captain Hood," he snorted, "you know me—Bown—Richmond P. Bown, of the Tilikum Lines. I direct you to put back to your dock at once. You hear me, at once!"

The words Fog Horn Hood had invented for this occasion turned stale, flat, inadequate entirely. He swallowed them. Only one thing, action, could answer this. He yanked the bell pull so hard it almost parted from its cord as he spun back the Queen's wheel and turned the freighter into the direction it had pointed.

"Olson," he snarled, "take the wheel. Steady as she goes, on the regular course. And keep her there, you hear me? Keep her there if all hell climbs aboard and the son of sin himself tries to stop you." He wheeled about, his head thrust forward, the corncob pipe gripped so tightly it tipped up and almost met his left eye, his shock of white hair bristling like the hair on an angry dog. "Now, *Mister* Richmond P. Bown," he roared, "suppose you *make* me go back to that dock!"

Richmond P. Bown's large, smooth face turned whiter. He gave a step or two before the bristling old skipper, but he puffed jerkily, "Captain Hood, you had better listen to me. I warn you. That young woman"—he pointed dramatically with a fat, white finger—"that young woman is my daughter, and subject to my orders."

Even Olson forgot the wheel long enough to join in Fog Horn's stare.

Bown puffed on: "Contrary to my expressed wishes and injunctions she has persisted in carrying on a secret correspondence with this young man. To-night she

was mad enough to run away from my home to join him. I followed the guilty pair aboard your boat and I find them here, sheltered by you. You will put back to your dock at once or you'll find your part as an accomplice in this disgraceful escapade a matter of most serious consequence. This girl's disobedience, her clandestine affair with this man, to-night's shameful, guilty conduct—"

The girl's companion interrupted here in a voice so savage it effectually stopped Bown.

"That's a dirty lie! You, her father, to say a thing like that! Blackening her name!" He appealed to them all. "Disgrace? What's the disgrace if we love each other? What disgrace if we insist on making our own plans, living our own lives the best we can? We ran away, yes, because that was the only way out of it. We knew the trains were watched, and we couldn't go on Mr. Bown's own Councilor, naturally! We had to come aboard here because we love each other and we are going to be married at once. I have the license."

The girl chimed in. "Yes, that's true. We are going to be married. I love him. Captain Hood, won't you listen! My mother has told me of you. She knew your wife. I know you'll be my friend. I love Dick. I'm going to marry him—"

"You're engaged to marry Wallace Schuyler," Bown panted. "You gave your solemn promise—wedding arranged—"

"I don't love him. I won't marry him. You made me give that promise, but I can break it—and I will." Again she appealed to Fog Horn Hood. "I don't care for Schuyler," she protested. "He—he is—" she shuddered, and added tremulously: "he's not the man I want!"

"Captain Hood," wheezed Bown, "you have been warned now. Either you put us ashore, or—"

"Bown," Fog Horn's voice grated ominously, "you hear me. This boat's bound for Bellingham on her own business, and if you was God A'mighty Himself I wouldn't turn around for you. You and me have dealt together before, Bown. You know what I say, I do. And now"—his voice began to rise to the old time, wrathful, si-

ten tones—"you been steamboatin' long enough to know the law about visitors in a wheel house. If you ain't it's on the wall there, framed. Bown, you get outside that door. You stay outside. If you as much as stick your ugly face in, I'll first smash it flatter'n it is even now and then I'll keep you in irons the rest of this trip." Fog Horn strode to the door and snatched it open. "Outside!" he roared, and even Olson, hardened Swede that he was, quivered like gelatine at that below.

At the door Bown had a final word.

"You," he said, pointing at his daughter, "try to get married! That's all, just try it! You have a license, eh? Let me tell you now, wherever you go I'll go with you. There isn't a minister, or a judge, or a justicee in this State or on this coast will marry you if I say no. And I'll be on hand to stop you wherever you go."

The door slammed a spiteful period to his words.

"He can't stop us," cried Callie Bown.

Her companion looked deeply worried. "I'm not so sure—in spite of having the license. Your father has influence everywhere. People are afraid of him. But don't you worry. It'll come out all right." He pressed the girl's hands in his.

"Here," said Fog Horn testily, "enough of that, young fellow. I ain't made up my mind about either one of you yet."

Fog Horn turned to Olson. "Give me the wheel now. You roust out the boy and have him clean out Doc Newman's stateroom; that's the engineer, Miss Callie. Tell him to stuff doc's things out of the way, Olson, and fix it up nice. Take Miss Callie along and get her whatever she wants. As for you, young man—"

"My name's Hanlon," said Callie Bown's sweetheart. "Dick Hanlon. I'm a cannery boss for the United Canners."

"We'll discuss that later," Fog Horn promised. "Olson will show you a locker top where you can make up a good bed. And as for *Mister* Richmond P. Bown"—Fog Horn stopped to smile grimly—"tell him, Olson, he can bunk up with the crew down below, or, if he don't like that, he's perfectly welcome to stand up all night. Now, all of you get out!"

An hour later, when Olson reported all arrangements made for the Queen's uninvited passengers, Fog Horn left the wheel to his mate, cautioning him about the ever-thickening fog and knocked at the door of the engineer's cabin, assigned to the use of Callie Bown. "Just wanted to know if things was all right," he growled.

"They're lovely—and you're an old dear," cried the girl, opening her door. She had removed the wraps and veils. She was a slender, graceful little thing, with soft, dark hair and wide, dark eyes. She smiled eagerly into the battered red face of Fog Horn Hood.

"My goshamighty!" exclaimed that ancient mariner. "You do favor your ma—sure you do! It's Callie Beck all over again! Her and me was schoolmates together, along with Mary Hood, my dear."

"I know," she smiled. "You were schoolmates and old friends—good friends, before—before my mother married."

"*Tilikums* is the word—*hyas skookum tilikums*, Callie."

"And you're going to help me, aren't you, Captain Hood!"

"Wisht I could, my dear, and I got two powerful reasons for wishin' it. One's because I hate your pa, hate him worse'n a poison snake. But that ain't a proper reason, Callie, because it's pretty hard to bring people happiness through spiteing a grudge. Better reason's because of your ma. Callie, I want you to tell me all about this thing, frankly, as if I was your own father. But don't expect much out of me. Richmond P. Bown's a powerful big, important business man and leading light; and me, why I'm just an old bum that runs a wheezy old steamboat. But tell me, as if I had a right to know."

Callie Bown told her story eagerly, about young Dick Hanlon whom she had known and flirted with, teased and loved for years, about his promising start in life and his prospects and about the coming of that social sensation, Wallace Vanderhoeven Schuyler.

"I never meant to marry Wallace. I don't love him," she protested. "Perhaps I went too far, just to tease Dick. Oh, I know it was wicked! Then my father de-

clared I had made the promise and Mr. Schuyler did, and they said I had to keep it. My father bullied me, made my life miserable. I had nobody to turn to. My father is mad to get himself recognized by society, crazy about the importance of his family. If you could have seen the announcement he had published in the papers—”

“ Yep, I did, Callie. I sure did!”

“ That's what finally opened my eyes, made me plainly ashamed of my own father and of myself. Then I knew I would never marry Wallace Schuyler. I knew I loved Dick. And I'll marry Dick Hanlon or nobody at all. You *are* going to help me!”

“ I'm going to talk to Dick,” was Fog Horn's only promise.

After that talk with Hanlon again alone in the pilot house, his face at the open window pressed into the dripping, gray fog blanket, guiding the aged Queen on her course and keeping her warning fog signal moaning, Fog Horn had plenty of time to think. He thought of school days and Mary and Callie Beck, her chum. He thought of all the high hopes and great ambitions of that time when life seemed so simple. Probably he sighed a little for the far different realization the years had brought. And he thought, too, of Callie's daughter and her father, whom he hated and of the young fellow Callie loved.

“ I wisht I could help!” he sighed. “ God knows I'd like to help 'em both. But I can't fight Bown's influence ashore. Nobody can. If I was a minister I'd marry 'em in a jump—quicker'n scat. But I ain't. A hell of a minister I'd make. I'm a rheumatic old bum that's captain of a steamboat, that's all I am—providin', of course, you'd be so good as to call this barnacle-bitten old wheelbarrow a steamboat!”

He sighed heavily and added: “ But I do wish I could help!” And then, with a sudden wide grin, his faded, blue eyes alight with joy of inspiration: “ And, by godfrey, maybe I can!” he cried.

III.

NOTHING is more soothing, more conducive to sound sleep than a berth aboard

an old-time, stern wheel steamboat. If there chance to be fog, shutting out the morning light, muffling all sound save the steady rumble of the engines turning over the big propelling paddles and the moan of the whistle, one's sleep is doubly sound.

A long night was gone and it was nine o'clock in the morning, though there was but the gray of dawn to tell it, when Fog Horn Hood relinquished the wheel to Olson. The mate found the old man surprisingly unwilling to leave his post. When he finally quit Fog Horn said sternly: “ Course is dead ahead. Keep that in your square skull, Olson. Dead ahead, steady as she goes, and if she drops off as much as a point I'm coming in here and chaw an arm off'n you!”

“ Steady as she goes,” Olson repeated placidly. “ Yah, Ay gass Ay can remember that.”

Fog Horn summoned the shock-haired boy who bore the impressive but empty title, steward. He bade him serve breakfast and call Callie Bown and Dick. “ And, boy,” he added, “ seen anythin' of a fat, white-faced, swelled up old toad in a gent's dress suit?”

“ Mr. Bown, sir?”

“ Seems like I've heard him called by that name.”

“ He woke me up at six, sir, and gave me a dollar to rent my bunk to sleep in. Shall I call him, too?”

“ No, son, I guess I wouldn't. Let him get his dollar's worth of sleep, he'll need it. Besides, I want to *enjoy* my breakfast. Can't with him sittin' by.”

Of the three, Fog Horn was the only one who gave signs of taking pleasure out of the meal. Callie Bown was pale and absent-minded. Her sweetheart looked badly worried. They gave brief answers to all questions, and asked frequently when the Queen would make port. Plainly, their immediate future did not look pleasant with Callie's father sworn to dog their footsteps and prevent their marriage.

But Fog Horn enjoyed himself enough for three. The old man bore an air of badly suppressed excitement that made his blue eyes sparkle and kept a grin pushing up the corners of his scrubbing brush mus-

tache. Once, when a long, slow roller lifted the little freighter and sent her staggering uncertainly he actually chuckled before he explained in answer to surprised glances, "Ground swell in the Gulf of Georgia today. We'll likely be turning soon into Bellingham."

Before he left the table Fog Horn demanded of Callie: "Still got that idea of marryin' this young fellow?"

"I have," Callie declared firmly.

"Marry him any time?"

"Any time, any place, anyhow, Captain Hood!"

"Good, my dear! Maybe you'll get a chance to prove that."

Fog Horn then bestowed a broad wink on the staring lovers and left them alone to puzzle it out.

During the morning Olson held the wheel. He had been given his course. He stayed on that course, and all that time, though the mist began to lighten, he saw no landfall. But if Olson had imagination he concealed it nobly. He held to the course, blew the Queen's fog signal regularly and remained placid.

He remained placid until close to noon. Then, the fog rolling back, he saw something that brought his big, blond head out of the window with a jerk and caused an open-mouthed survey of the visible world so absorbed that the stubby little Queen veered wildly on her course.

"Goodjudaspriest!" said Olson, all in one breath.

His first impulse was to jam the wheel hard down, turning the Queen sharply on her heel, sending her scuttling back over the track she had come. He went so far as to shove down a few spokes before Fog Horn's orders flashed into his mind. Instead, he corrected his error and sent the handy boy scuttling to call the captain.

Fog Horn followed Olson's pointing finger and heard Olson's speech with a twinkle and a mock surprise. "I'm teetotally damned," he declared, "if I ain't the prize thick-headed, doddering old fool! Gone an' lost my way in the fog, completely turned around. And now look where we got to!"

"Ay gass we beat it quick, hey?" Olson suggested. "Ay put the helm hard down?"

"No," said Fog Horn quickly, and his arm gripped the mate's shoulder. "No, I guess you don't. I gave you the course—steady as she goes."

"Well!" said Olson after a long stare at him. "Well, you ban captain!"

Puget Sound joins the Pacific Ocean by a wide water lane, the Strait of Juan de Fuca. That strait ends in a cape that bears a reputation as black as Good Hope. It is Cape Flattery. Its reefs, its tides, its treacherous weather makes up a long chapter in sea history.

This particular noon the lookout in the government station at Tatoosh saw something that almost made him drop his binoculars. Through the thinning shreds of fog, across the placid ground swells of the Pacific, dwarfed to the proportions of a child's Noah's Ark by towering cliffs and snow-capped Olympics trundled an old-fashioned, stubby, squat, homely, humpbacked stern-wheel steamboat with an enormous paddle box. The apparition showed no flag or signal. She held straight on her way, her single, rustled stack belching black smoke, the big paddle wheel trailing a long wake of creaming foam.

Serenely she came out of the mist, went her way and vanished, and the astounded lookout could find no profanity to express his astonishment. A Japanese liner passed her, farther on. A passenger steamship rounding the cape with a smart turn, reported her still farther out, and men and women left their deck chairs to crowd the rail and stare until she was but a dim plume of smoke, lost out on the flat horizon of the lazy, smiling, ever-treacherous Pacific.

To the shock-haired boy, who waited scared, by his side, Fog Horn Hood said abruptly: "The captain's compliments to Miss Callie Bown and Mr. Hankon. Tell them I want to see them here at once. And, Buddy, rouse out that fat man from your bunk and tell him he'd better come a-runnin'. Now burn the deck or I'll leave you out here to swim home!"

The boy started. "Wait!" roared Fog Horn. "One thing more. When you come back stop in my cabin and bring me the prayer book that's lyin' open on my desk."

Olson, leaning weakly against the big

wheel, wiped his sweating brow with a hand that shook.

"Yumping Yosef!" he whispered faintly.

IV.

RICHMOND P. BOWN owned numerous steamships, deep-draft steel hulls, bought on the Atlantic coast and brought all the way around Cape Horn, under their own power, before the days of the Panama Canal. But Richmond P. Bown set sufficient valuation on his own person that he would not have trusted himself outside Cape Flattery even aboard the Councilor, the pride of his fleet.

When the head of the Tilikum Lines, waked rudely from deep sleep, staggered to the Queen's deck and found that flat-bottomed relic of a bygone day, that aged steam scow that could float almost on a morning mist, plodding methodically across the broad Pacific, headed straight for Japan, he thought for a moment he had gone mad overnight and was seeing things. Then, fully awake, he fairly galloped to answer Fog Horn Hood's summons. In the pilot house he met fresh astonishment.

His daughter and Dick Hanlon were there, ranged before Fog Horn, who held a prayer book in his hand and had donned his spectacles, the better to read from it. Olson, steadying the wheel, looked on with a wide grin, as did the shock-haired boy steward. The Queen's engines had been slowed until there was just enough headway to hold her bow to the long rollers.

When Bown burst in, Fog Horn, with a beaming smile, was addressing them all in terms of the church service as "Dearly beloved." He stopped short at sight of Bown. "You're in time, Bown, to witness your daughter's marriage. Stand there by the boy—"

Bown gasped. "Are you all crazy? Turn this boat back! Somebody seize that lunatic—"

"Be still," Fog Horn commanded. "Time's too valuable to listen to your yapping. Bown, this boat is at sea, more'n three miles off any coast. I'm her captain. The captain of a vessel at sea, beyond the boundary line of nations, has power to en-

force laws, to punish and imprison and to perform civil contracts like marriage. I've questioned your daughter and her young man. I'm satisfied they're fitted to marry. I'm a goin' to marry them now." Again he peered at the book and began reverently: "Dearly beloved—"

"Stop!" Bown shouted. Fear and rage made him frantic. Tears stood in his eyes and his voice broke unevenly. "Olson! Can't somebody stop that lunatic?"

"Olson!" Fog Horn thundered. "Let the boy hold that wheel. Stand by this man Bown. If he moves or yips once more knock him down. Then handcuff him!"

Olson obeyed with evident enjoyment of the situation. Fog Horn continued to glare at Bown as once more he began, and this time in a voice calculated to freeze the marrow in the bones: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in sight of God and man—"

When that brief ceremony was read and Fog Horn had kissed the bride his first act was to turn his steamboat toward America and ring for all speed. The fog had gone and already a brisk breeze was ruffling the long rollers of the Pacific. The short, squat Queen, with her ridiculous old-fashioned stern paddle wheel, was making hard labor of even this fair weather. And fair weather off Cape Flattery is nothing to trust in.

Bown had his say. "Captain Hood, all of you, I warn you now you'll answer for this! This marriage is illegal. Hanlon—Callie, you hear what I say. This is unlawful—"

"That's a lie," said Fog Horn calmly. "I'll take it to court," Bown shouted. "I'll show you if it's a lie. I'll make every one of you suffer for this. I—"

"You'll what!" roared the Queen's skipper, turning on him suddenly.

Richmond P. Bown was not a sailor. He had been roused suddenly from his bunk. He had eaten no breakfast. He had suffered great excitement. And now the Queen was pitching giddily. He neglected to explain what he would do, but turning, ran madly from the pilot house and was not seen again until the Puget Queen, late that night, entered Bellingham Harbor.

Just before the end of that voyage of

adventure Fog Horn hunted out Bown and spoke earnestly with him.

"You don't like me," said the old man, "and I don't like you. Let's forget that for a minute. Consider Callie. She's your daughter. She went and married the man she loves instead of taking your advice. Well, women do things like that. It's their nature. Bown, you got a good chance right now to insure a lot of future happiness by telling that girl it's all right and you forgive 'em both. If you take my advice—"

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," Bown answered with venom compounded of all his meanness, his hate of Fog Horn and the active memory of his awful day, "I'm going to spend my last cent, if I have to, to have that marriage set aside. I'm going to send you to prison for the rest of your life. I'll make Hanlon and Callie regret this day until the moment of their death. That's what I'll do!"

But when the Queen docked Bown did nothing of the sort. A white-faced secretary was waiting his arrival for several hours. "Four newspaper reporters are looking for you on the wharf," he announced.

Bown started to say he would not see them.

"Mr. Bown, listen!" cried the secretary,

displaying a sheaf of black headlines, "Wallace Schuyler is missing. The police want him for fraud charges. The man is an imposter, not the son of Morgan J. Schuyler, but a nephew. The son is traveling in Europe. When your wedding announcement was telegraphed to New York, Morgan J. Schuyler issued a statement at once. Mr. Bown, absolutely you must make some explanation to those reporters!"

And at this moment the reporters were not ten feet off.

Richmond P. Bown was a genius in his own way. He heard and digested the startling news with no perceptible change of countenance. In the same moment, smiling, he stepped forward to greet the newspaper men, and his voice held nothing but happiness as he exclaimed suavely: "Gentlemen, I'm delighted to tell you that some days ago my daughter discovered her infatuation for Wallace Schuyler merely a passing whim. Her better nature triumphed against the false glitter of money and social position. She has married the man of her choice, a Westerner, a sterling fellow, a man of bright promise in the business field, Mr. Richard Hanlon, of the United Packers staff. Gentlemen, I shall be pleased to present you to the happy pair. Follow me!"



A SONG OF YOUTH

LIFE calls me out on the sunlit road,
Out where the winds blow free,
There's never a sorrow in my light load
Nor a care in the heart of me.

And I'll drink my fill of red romance—
Of love and laughter gay—
And along with me will the lassies dance
To the lilt of a rondelay.

And when the moon o'er the shining trail
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We'll charter a ship of dreams and sail
Away on the sea of night.

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F. E. Wright, South Carolina railroad man, finds the Comer Agency a great profit maker. \$256.56 for one month's leisure hours' effort.

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Does that sound too good to be true? If it does, then let me tell you what Carl Rowe did in a small town in New York State. Rowe was a baker earning \$50 a week. He accepted my offer. He did just what I am trying to get you to do. He quit his job and made as much as \$80 a month. Then he quit his job as a baker and by spending all his time on this new work made from \$900 to \$1200 a month. You can do every bit as well he did.

If that isn't enough, then let me tell you about E. A. Sweet of Michigan. He was an electrical engineer and didn't know anything about selling. In his first month's spare time he earned \$243. Inside of two months he was making between \$800 and \$1200 a month.

W. J. McCrary is another man I want to tell you about. He quit his job and paid him \$200 a day, but this wonderful new work has enabled him to make \$9,000 a year.

Yes, send right this very minute you are being offered the same proposition that has made these men so successful. Do you want it?

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Now, Comer Coats are not sold in stores. All our orders come through our own representatives. Within the next few months we will pay our representatives more than three hundred thousand dollars for sending us orders.

And now, I am offering you the chance to become our representative in your territory and get your share of that money. All you do is to take orders. We do the rest. We deliver. We collect and you get your money the same day you take the order.

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You can see how simple it is. We furnish you with a complete outfit and tell you how to get the business in your territory. We help you to get started. It is only needed two average orders a day, which you can get in the morning or so in the evening, you can make \$48 a week and more.

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Well, here is your chance to find out, for this is the same proposition that enabled George Garon to make a clear profit of \$40 in his first day's work—the same proposition that gave R. W. Krieger \$20 net profit in a half hour. This is the same opportunity that gave A. B. Spencer \$625 cash for one month's spare time.

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